Those born in eras of stagnation
Cannot recall their chosen way.
Children of Russia's terrible years,
We can't forget a single day.

These remarkable lines were written at the beginning of the century by Alexander Blok (1880-1921), described by a Soviet poet, the late Pavel Antokolsky, as "the conscience of Russian poetry".

Blok began as one of the founders of symbolism. The poet of *The Stranger* and *The Beautiful Lady*, he sought deliverance from the vulgarity of the world in mysticism and fantasy. During the first Russian revolution of 1905-1907, however, Blok was already beginning to realise that his path and that of the people were the same. Russia the Homeland became the dominant theme in his poetry.

And all is ours, but mine no longer:
There's contact with the world outside.

In October 1917, Blok openly and unequivocally sided with the people in their uprising. "With all your body, with all your heart, with all your mind — listen to the Revolution," was his summons. It was to the Revolution that two works of genius were dedicated: *The Twelve* and *The Scythians*. They are rightly held to mark the birth of Soviet poetry.

"None of the Russian poets who came from the past to that great and fateful year of 1917," wrote Konstantin Fedin, "...has taken such a place in the history of our poetry".

This *Selected Poems*, published for the 100th anniversary of Alexander Blok's birth, features the best of his complex and many-sided verse. Pavel Antokolsky discusses the poet's life and work in a comprehensive foreword.

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1907

Александр Блок

Alexander BLOK

Selected Poems

Translated from the Russian
by *Alex Miller*

Designed
by *Inna Borisova*

АЛЕКСАНДР БЛОК
ИЗБРАННОЕ
На английском языке

Printed in the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics

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BOOK THREE (1907-1916)

RETRIBUTION

ALEXANDER BLOK

Alexander Blok's formative years coincided with the period of transition from the 19th to the 20th century. With incomparable lyrical sincerity and power, he mirrored the spiritual crisis of a whole generation. The poet himself, however, was not so much a victim of the crisis as the living, effective and revolutionary triumph over it.

Although it became obvious in 1917-1918, the forces for that triumph began accumulating in the depths of Blok's mind as early as in 1905.

In the days immediately after the October Revolution, Alexander Blok was one of the first and most courageous of the Russian intellectuals sincerely and unequivocally to side with the revolutionary people, who believed that the Bolsheviks were right and who declared this openly. He ventured into a violent break with many of his recently like-minded colleagues and contemporaries This courage was inspired by his sense of civic duty and his conscience as a poet and a democrat. He clearly saw the world significance of the proletarian revolution.

Only those blinded by spitefulness and prejudice accused Blok of treachery or preferred to see his conduct as that of an irresponsible decadent.

More than once, Blok affirmed the organic integrity and inevitability of the path he took. When assembling and re-editing the three volumes of his lyrical verse, he insisted that together they made a complete story in three parts:

"Open my books: everything that will happen is said in them"

Indeed, only by tracing Blok's development from the beginning can we understand him properly, appreciate his integrity, and realise the organic kinship between the poet of the Beautiful Lady and the creator of *The Twelve* and *The Scythians.*

In the 80s and 90s of the last century, just a short distance away from the railway line linking Moscow and St. Petersburg, a good-looking boy, much spoilt by his mother and her relatives, was [illegible] up on his maternal grandfather's estate. He was without a [illegible] [illegible]ause his mother, after a year of unhappy marriage, had [illegible] to her own family with the baby boy. The troubled parental [illegible]ps and the remote image of his father were to become [illegible] personal problem much later in life. For the time being, [illegible]er the boy had nothing to disturb him. He grew up in a nice [illegible] in a talented milieu, surrounded by women who adored him [illegible] were of the gentry and one of the most intellectually accomplished families in Russia, the outcome of many decades of culture and prosperity. His grandfather was Andrei Nikolayevich Beketov, the famous botanist. His grandmother was an industrious translator.

There were books galore in their country house, there was always music, and there was never an end to the arguments about all the things that only Russians can argue about. Outside the big, bright, sparkling windows there was a green world with colourful patches of flowers, and, beyond it, roads and villages, a field and a forest, hills and dales, and the blue horizon that was so dear to him from childhood and that afterwards would always be associated with the first fairy-tales he read, whether "The Sleeping Beauty", "Kashchey", "Ivan-Tsarevich" or "The Snow Maiden".

Not such a long time had elapsed since an earlier decade when, in much the same kind of country house, there grew up, under the wing of an excessively devoted grandmother, another Russian with a poetic *daimon* who was subsequently to become a subaltern in the Tenginsky Regiment and the pride of Russian poetry. These two destinies, that of Lermontov and that of Blok, became history in exactly the same way. Today they seem commensurate and akin, as if they were truly side by side in space and time.

But the times were altogether different.

The 19th century was nearly over and, with it, the Russia of the gentry Turgenev, Chekhov and Bunin, each in his own way, recorded this farewell. So did Alexander Blok. His farewell to the past was sometimes elegiac in tone, but sometimes it turned into calm and concentrated contempt, sometimes into fury. He was, after all, the same "belated offspring" whom Lermontov had foreseen:

...So, with the sternness of a judge and citizen,
Our dust shall be lampooned in lines full of derision.
With the embittered anger of the hoodwinked son
At his own father's dissipation

All this was to come much later. He had to live his own life in order to understand it historically, to recognise in himself the son and grandson of his fathers and grandfathers. This was to become fundamental to Blok's thought. At first, it would lead him to

an understanding of his homeland, and then compel him with all his heart, with all his mind to listen to the revolution.

It would be relevant here to describe daily life in a classical high school, the various books he read, some of which left no trace while others were engraved in his memory for the rest of his life. What else? Two or three friendships, the first infatuation, experienced a long way from home, in a foreign land, in a little German town; the university with its philological disciplines, the recitations of his favourite verse...

Something was growing within him, accumulating little by little, having been planted there by nature itself and inevitable in his inner world as yet undisclosed to anyone: this was creative power He began writing poems at the age of five. They were the usual childish efforts, to be followed by adolescent verse. There was nothing to indicate the future author of *Lines to the Beautiful Lady*

Suddenly, a new note, a thought of his own destiny breaks through into the imitative verse:

I've been ordained by Destiny,
At the entrance to the Ideal, to shine
With duly reverent piety
This glowing, misty torch of mine.

The torch is misty indeed. The Ideal is not yet named. All of his life, all its disasters and successes lie ahead. He is nineteen years old. Such is Blok on the threshold of the new age.

The real poet is read by time. Each new century reads him anew and re-establishes its link with him in its own way. That is what has happened and is happening before our eyes with Shakespeare, Dante and Goethe We sense the same with Pushkin and Lermontov, in spite of our relative nearness to them in time. The same is now happening with Alexander Blok.

His contemporaries, especially in the Moscow symbolist group—Andrei Bely, Sergei Soloviev and others—understood Blok's early poems to the Beautiful Lady as purely mystic confessions, the affirmation of the Eternal Feminine, the other-worldly image derived from the philosophical lyrics of Vladimir Soloviev. This was the reading of that era, the interpretation engendered and justified by the epoch. And this interpretation harboured the seeds of the future break between Alexander Blok and this group of friends, especially Andrei Bely, with whom the "enmity-friendship" meant so much in the lives of both poets.

Over sixty years have passed since then. The *Lines to the Beautiful Lady* have been interpreted anew.

The first book by the twenty-year-old Alexander Blok has survived in Russian poetry as one of the most intense lyrical confessions of a young man's love for a woman. The poems are addressed to the woman and are written solely for her. To Pushkin she was "A fleet-

ion" or "Phantom of purest beauty" and to Blok she was ... Dawn Burning Bush". To the one, the dear eyes shine under the mysterious cold mask" at a society ball; to the n damp Petersburg, in the light of the gas jets—but the ... does not change. All are dictated by the young man's ...n at the moment of its glorious ascent. To whatever inaccessible ...its the poet projects his love, even to the point at which *to the Milky Ways, you are hid in thundercloud,* the real-life ...ication comes through nevertheless.

My song-filled heart is bursting with the story
About those long and blissful quests of mine.
From all these songs I have raised up a building;
The other songs I'll sing some other time.

And so the living human voice broke through. It announced its existence with superb self-possession and fervour. The restrictions of the traditional amphibrachs and iambics were given new life by living cadences

There had never been such a use of silence in Russian poetry before, although it had been sought by many, including Lermontov, Fet and Blok's older contemporaries. This is the point at which Russian 20th-century poetry begins. This is where the cadences of Mayakovsky's poetry originate.

Vladimir Soloviev's mysticism, of course, had a marked influence on the young Blok. It may be that he read too much and the whole tenor of his thought was idealistic to excess. But this is where the power of his talent lies: it was more vital than its literary sources. It was fraught with a sense of the future In Blok's very first poems there is not only a heart-rending sincerity, there is something else—a prescience of the future, of a road leading far into the distance.

Particularly noticeable is the poet's close kinship with Russia, with the old Russia, with folk-lore, fairy-tales and songs:

My beloved, my prince, my bridegroom,
In your meadow of flowers you're forlorn.
On the opposite bank I have blossomed
Like a plant in the ripe golden corn.

"The opposite bank" is easily identified. It is the North Russian landscape, perhaps a short distance away from the railway, but only a stone's throw at the most. The landscape is peopled with characters from Russian folk-lore, like the fairy-tales once told to Pushkin by his nurse, Arina Rodionovna. It is not the first time that Russian lyrical poetry came from this radiant source.

One day, Blok would say: *Russia! My wife!* There was a day when Russia, not addressed by name, was a bride to him: *My*

beloved, my prince, my bridegroom – she calls her bard from the dark blue of the country horizons, from the fields of clover above which the golden hornet buzzes at noon in summer. The Russian fairy-tale is never far away in Blok. It is evoked by the prophetic birds *Sirin* and *Hamayun* of Russian folk-lore, and the *Book of Doves* with the red and gold headpieces:

> *Lofty the tower, there's a glow in the skies,*
>
> *Each little carved wooden horse on view*
> *Breathes out a tongue of red fire at you*

All these are the scarce discernible embryos of the future. Everything will come to pass, everything will return to the poet in images matured beyond recognition Even the red flame will develop into the vast and quiet fire over Kulikovo Field, and then into the world conflagration, to the woe of all the bourgeoisie in *The Twelve*.

But, for the time being, he is a long way from the future Like every young man, he can only exclaim:

> *On the day – great things will be accomplished.*
> *I can sense the soul's feat yet to come.*

Meanwhile, the future is on the threshold. And not only for him. The most sensitive and daring of his contemporaries are haunted by forebodings of coming events, terrifying and beautiful. This is when Gorky composes his *Song of the Stormy Petrel*. In tones muted, and yet the more muffled the more compelling to the audience at the Art Theatre, Chekhov's characters dream about the future.

Russia was on the threshold of 1905. The further away Blok was from life, the more forcefully, sincerely and unexpectedly there arose in him not only his sympathy for the revolution, which could be shared with thousands of ordinary people, but also a feeling of deep involvement in what was happening.

The beautiful poems about Petersburg during the uprising, about the Bronze Horseman in whose hand the torch flame has begun to dance, testify to a sudden crisis in the poet's mind. Unusual elements irrupt into his writing. The following lines were dictated not by humility or distraction, but by a compulsive insight into the significance of what was happening:

> *They emerged from the darkness of cellars,*
> *And their heads were set low on their necks;*
> *The sound of their footsteps grew louder,*
> *And the noise of their strange dialects.*
>
> . . . .

We abandoned our quests and surmises:
Let our places be taken by others!

The 1905 revolution was significant to Blok not only as an actual [illegible] requiring expression. For the first time in his poetry, we hear [illegible] unfettered voice—the voice of the man who can mount the platform [illegible] go into the public places. Perhaps not everything he said was [illegible] heard or understood. What mattered was that he was addressing [illegible] great host of humanity, society, his contemporaries, his fellow citizens

To all who bare their breasts to the sun in yearning,
At crossways, in cellars, on towers—all praise!
To the sun, the audacious sun, persistent, burning,
Our voices in hymns, songs and dreams we raise!

Blok had never used such language before. Today, it rings forth like a welcome to the future, a welcome addressed to us.

The years of the reaction were those in which Blok finally reached manhood and maturity. The youthful verses about the Beautiful Lady and the burst of creativeness in 1905 were already part of the past. The coterie of contemporaries with whom he had been on such intimate terms, had broken up.

. These years were decisive in Blok's life. He was not solely a poet now, he was a publicist, a resolute thinker, a historian, a scholar. He stood before all the variety of life, voraciously read many books, travelled to the Western countries, studied monuments of world art and the faces of the crowd in the cities of Europe. He had something to say to people: broad generalisations, thoughts about the past and future of mankind. Bitter thoughts. Blok never avoided the unpleasant truth.

In this way, he arrived at a complete and organic world outlook. Later, he was to call it tragic. "Optimism in general," he wrote, "is an unsophisticated and limited view of the world, and it usually excludes any possibility of contemplating the world as a whole. Its only common justification to people and to itself is that it is the opposite of pessimism; but it never coincides with the *tragic* outlook of the world, which alone can furnish the key to an understanding of the world's complexity" ("The Fall of Humanism").

What is the essence of the tragic outlook on the world? To elaborate Blok's idea further, it must be said that it is first and foremost *dialectic*, fully open to the conflicts and contradictions of life. The artist's task is to scrutinise and understand life in the struggle of its opposing forces, in the eternal flow of movement. It is not hard to see that Blok's dream of an integral world outlook is close to us today.

The vital and central point of Blok's reflections was where poetry is contiguous with life, personality with society, and the present with the whole of the history.

Children of Russia's terrible years,
We can't forget a single day.

Years of the holocaust! Could there be
Tidings in you of hope or madness?

The gap between the intelligentsia and the people, the tremendous hostility that has built up over the centuries between culture and the elements – these problems are stated in Blok's articles with fierce and uncompromising urgency. Blok had to find ultimate, direct and honest answers

Over all the "accursed" problems there was a plangent longing, a heart-rending love for Russia. If in the early poems, it is heard in the orchestral under-part, in a sudden, surging wave which compels one to remember a song heard somewhere – now, in the mature work, it bursts into the open like a fanfare of trumpets; it rolls on in the strings, and again and again is reiterated in new modulations and tempi – solemn, determined, demanding

This is the Russia of his dream, the Russia that ought to be. Sensed in the folk epics and the fairy-tales, *Where peoples of such different visage, / From vale to vale, from land to land, / By the glow of the burning village, / Spend the nights dancing hand in hand.*

The remote past and the immediate present stand side by side. Blok himself does not yet know what lies in store for him: the days of *The Lay of Igor's Host*, or the picture of capitalist Russia, the Russia of the factories – *A many-floored factory building. / And townships of working-class slums...* Again and again he finds himself face to face with the centuries-long history of the country, with its vast and boundless spaces.

Did you have strange knowledge? Or believe in some divinity?
How are we to tell what your songs are trying to say?
Chudi were here, and the Meryans travelled
Log-tracks, highways, set milestones on the way.

What was his personal life like at this time? Far from bright or unclouded. On the way out was everything that is expected of a passionate and sinful man. Alexander Blok's life was that of an intellectual, it was youth lost in... *the taverns, the side-streets, the byways–/ An electrical waking dream*, it was open to all the temptations of the nocturnal city. "Despair and bitterness" predominate in Blok's lyrics of that time. Meanwhile he was perfecting his technique, the virtuoso rhythms were refined to convey the orgiastic atmosphere of the restaurants and the wild abandon of the gypsies.

He had already said: *It's hard for someone dead among the living /To seem alive and passionate everywhere.* The best poems had been written. People were now learning them by heart. The classics of

'... cycle had been published. Alexander Blok was the most ...nd most loved poet of that era. He had many imitators, ...n crude variety stage. But the more rollicking were the ...s composed "à la Blok", the more gloomy, self-contained he became, compressing with a shudder his bitter thoughts ...compass of a few quatrains...

...t did it consist of, this perfection of the mature Alexander ...who cast such a spell on his contemporaries—and not just his ...mporaries—but on all who followed them?

I was eager for hatred between us,
So why all these rich presents of yours,
Flowering meadows, the glittering heavens—
All your beauty's implacable curse?

* * *

Does this lock of hair, so golden shining,
Not come from the fire of former days?
You, so passionate, impious, drained of feeling,
Unforgettable—forgive me, please!

For whom and where are these spell-binding complaints addressed? To some woman, with the possibility of ascertaining, through documents, her name, patronymic, surname and home address? In fact, the position is quite different!

It concerns the prime source of poetic inspiration, or, even more broadly, the prime source of youthful joy in life, so innocent once and so clouded now. The first quotation comes from the poem, *To the Muse*. The second refers to a real woman who has only one distinguishing feature: a golden lock of hair. But here, too, the subject is the same—the irrevocable.

Blok's magic is that each responds differently and in his own way to this plaint about the defilement of Beauty, about its tragic fate. Soon, very soon, Alexander Blok will return once more, and for the last time, to the defilement of Beauty, to its tragic end.

The year was 1914. The First World War had broken out. Among the Russian poets, many were found who willingly and with professional alacrity celebrated in verse the official slogans of the tsarist government. The voice of the young Mayakovsky, rejecting war, was yet to be heard. Blok's voice had not been noticed either, for all its significance and dignity:

The Petrograd sky was all turbid with drizzle
And a troop-train was bound for the war.
Platoon after platoon, men with rifles and bayonets,
Filling carriages—more and still more.

And here is an astonishing fact. While the representatives of the most diverse persuasions and trends looked into the appalling face of war, hoped that this was the last war on the green planet and believed that man, having reached the absolute limit in the art of annihilation, would come to his senses in the end—Blok eschewed such wishful thinking.

In his rough notes we read: "Is this really the last war on earth?" He found the courage of sober knowledge—to look straight into the future, and his mind was not poisoned by the "frightful vision of future wars".

So many books, scientific and pseudo-scientific, were written at that time, about the "spiritual crisis", about the "doom of Europe"! So many intellectuals in Europe were prey to weariness and a revulsion from life! These were the ones of whom Blok said:

As for those who knew not that there once was a past,
And the future's no dark, empty nothing,
Their hearts have been dulled by the thirst for revenge,
And their mouths are all twisted with loathing

The categories of the past and the future clearly show to what this all refers. It refers to history, to the living sense of uninterrupted historical flow. Blok had it in the very highest degree.

If, during the October Revolution, Blok was one of the first to turn with an open heart to the people who were making that revolution, there is nothing surprising about this. It was the inevitable continuation of his course. When, back in the stagnant days of the reaction, amid the general disorder and vacillation of minds, with a determination which to many seemed almost maniacal—"naively", as his learned opponents put it—he asked the "fateful" and "accursed" questions about the gap between the intelligentsia and the people, when he demanded of himself and his contemporaries an art that would be morally justified and necessary to the people—that was when his future attitude to the revolution was determined.

Open your eyes, open them quickly
To life's unfathomable horrors,
Before the great storm that's impending
Destroys all in this land of yours.

This was said about the same acceptance of reality unavoidable for Blok. His leader was the truth, he was guided by his conscience.

In a letter to V. Rozanov in 1909*, he wrote:

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* Rozanov, V.V (1856-1919)—Russian religious philosopher, literary critic and journalist.—*Ed*

feel embarrassed, talking idly to some official or military man,
[illegible]tant; I won't go to the Easter matins at St. Isaac's
[illegible]t tell what is shining: the soldier's helmet or the
[illegible] is swaying: the gendarme's stole or the priest's whip
[illegible] deeply revolting." And in another letter, also to Ro-

[illegible]esent-day Russian state machine is, of course, foul, dribbling,
[illegible] old age: a seventy-year-old syphilitic... The Russian revolution,
[illegible]est representatives, is youth with a halo round its head...
[illegible] is anything to live for, then it is this alone. And if
[illegible]ywhere such a Russia is 'maturing', then, of course, it is only
[illegible] the heart of the Russian revolution...".

It should not be forgotten that his grim determination to be on the side of the revolutionary people did not come to him easily. In too many ways—education, bonds of friendship, world outlook and literary position—he was tied to the departing society. His decision stirred up the frenzied hatred of the overwhelming majority of those who, until recently, had shared his views, and of the entire liberal Russian intelligentsia.

The events and positions dating back so many years have become the property of history, but Blok's spiritual outburst has not aged or receded into the past. It impresses us to this day.

In 1917-1918 he believed unshakeably in the nobility and greatness of the people who were achieving their will in the social revolution. He was delighted by the revolutionary order that reigned in Petrograd from the moment when the tsarist police disappeared, and he was delighted by the magnanimity of the proletariat.

Conscientiously and eagerly, he noted all the new signs and marks of features he had come to love in the people, listened intently to the conversations of the soldiers guarding the Winter Palace, to which he was admitted as a member of the Supreme Investigation Committee. No battles of words, no vulgar abuse could shake his faith in the justness of the people's cause.

Together with faith in the new social forces, there was an amost unaccountable rage. *Rage, rage, bitter rage/Seething in the heart... Black rage, holy rage* .. against the outgoing world. Indeed, it is about himself that he is talking in *The Twelve*. He does not even try to explain the causes of the hatred. It is so violent that it gives a clue to all the experience of the poet's life, the many scattered impressions gleaned from tsarist Russia, from the Western countries, and from the literary milieu that cost him so much blood, and even from his own family, of which he was none too respectful. Until quite recently, Blok had neither been able, nor had he wanted, to give a name to the world that was so hostile to him In 1917 he identified his enemy without a qualm: it was the bourgeoisie, the bourgeoisie all over the world, but above all that of Petersburg, the vulgar philistine, identical at all social levels, even when of blue-blooded origin. Here, Blok was amazingly keen-sighted and utterly without mercy. He looked on a harmless resident

in the same building, a former government official, with determined and concentrated hatred; he became something like a criminal investigator into this chance human habitation. In the whole of the revolutionary publicism of those times, little will be found to rival the impassioned denunciations on the pages of Blok's diaries!

Truly *The love / And hatred that I feel are far too much / For anyone to bear for long.* This was stated ten years before the revolution and irrupted spontaneously into his life with it

On completing *The Twelve*, Blok, usually very modest, made this entry in his notebook· "Today I'm a genius " The poem was in many ways unexpected, even for its author It was the result, as he put it, of a "blind surrender to the elements". The quivering, fluctuating background to the poem, its inner, sometimes implied landscape – the wind, the blizzard, the nocturnal city and its outskirts blocked with snowdrifts – all this came back from Blok's youth. from *The Snow Mask*.

And drawing splashes of snow behind us
We fly into a million chasms .

New for Blok, however, were the folk cadences of the poem, its connection with barrack-room slang, with the *chastushka* rhythms of 1917, with the common language of the city people.

The dark, turbid swarm of phantoms starting up in this poem of genius – twelve Red Guards marching with a mighty tread through a snowstorm in the Petrograd streets in 1919 – none of this will ever be forgotten in our poetry. The twelve Red Guards had come to stay.

The finale of *The Twelve* requires particularly close scrutiny. I have in mind the baffling appearance of Christ in the last chapter. As is known, the poet himself refused to explain from where this evangelical image appears, and why. Our literary scholars have either steered clear of the unsolved riddle or have tried, with the aim of the author's ideological rehabilitation and that of the poem, to negate the importance of the image. In my opinion, the scholars have acted wrongly in both cases. As for Blok himself, even his silence does not relieve us of the obligation to understand *The Twelve* in depth, that is, as an integral and legitimately completed work of art. Such an analysis is deserved only by a great poet. We can only disclose the essence of the poem successfully by disclosing that of the last chapter. It is full of mounting alarm from the first line. The twelve Red Guards go striding through nocturnal Petrograd, through the snowdrifts left by the blizzard. Their alarm can be heard in the unanswered questions flung into the blackness of the night:

Something's moving! Who goes there? "

. . . . .

"Answer will you! Who goes there?.."

. . . .

"Who's that with the red flag flying?

. . . . .

"Who's that dodging round the buildings
Like a convict on the run?"

. . . . . .

"I'll get hold of you, don't worry!
Whether you give up or not!"
"You'll be for it, comrade! Hurry!
Come on out, or else be shot!"

By quoting these abrupt, fragmentary exclamations, we have exhausted the whole driving force of the chapter and are approaching the end of the poem The reply to the Red Guards' dismay is obvious and simple: the unknown who is marching in front with a red flag through the darkness of the snowy night and whom the Red Guards take for an enemy and evil-doer – that enigmatic spectre is none other than Christ.

This is Blok's answer to his characters' alarm Christ is leading them along the battle road of revolution; he is invisible to them, invulnerable to their bullets and, perhaps, is hated by them.

The decisive quality of Alexander Blok as a spiritual and creative personality, the quality that clearly emerges through the years with growing depth and clarity, consisted in the striving to achieve – in big and small alike – the topmost possible summit: of comprehension, of experience, both personal and social-historical – a summit that was purely creative. Hence the unending quest for a synthesis of culture, a synthesis meaningful and all-embracing in its definitions. Blok thought of culture itself in three dimensions equally essential to him: morality, social ties and beauty. In *The Twelve* he achieved his aim of blending the three principles of culture into one.

The *social* was suggested by the era itself: before the poet's eyes, the greatest social upheaval in history had gained momentum and was continuing further on its course. Blok's own stance in relation to these historic events was clearly and plainly defined: nothing here need give rise to doubt and no qualifications are needed.

Next to the social element, or to be more exact, from within it, comes *beauty*, and the way in which it is degraded and defiled. In the satirical images of the departing world of philistinism – degradation. to Blok it was above all an *ugly* world. And the defilement of beauty is even worse, it is in the centre of the plot: it is murder. One of the Red Guards murders his mistress, a Petrograd prostitute – the one who used to go with the officer-cadets and now hangs about with privates. This little tart is beyond the social struggle – whether above or below it makes no difference – but the officers and the

soldiers are equally in need of her. Katya is not merely the image of an unhappy "fallen" woman snatched alive from her surroundings. The murder of Katya is not merely a routine episode in a sordid crime story. In the poem, we have something more vital to the poet of the Beautiful Lady. With Katya, Love itself has been murdered – Love with a capital "L" is essential; it is sufficiently justified by Blok Love has been murdered, which means that Beauty also has been slain

It is on the strength of this juxtaposition of motifs, on the complexity of their structure, in the search for this synthesis, that Christ appears at the end of the poem. He appears as a moral sanction of the events in progress, in other words, as a request and a promise: not clear to the protagonists and more than their bewildered minds can take, but intended to help them. From Blok's point of view, they really need such help – and it is the only help they need.

In *The Scythians* Blok goes right to the heart of the matter. The first line tells us that straightaway: *"t'my"* are contrasted with millions. The millions can be counted, but not the *"t'my"*. In old Slavonic, *"t'ma"* is something that cannot and need not be counted. So with Blok: the subject is the whole existence of man with his countless forebears and countless descendents in posterity – the "human race" that is sung about in "The Internationale".

The beginning of the second stanza also suggests infinity. *You've had whole centuries. We – a single hour*· the cycle of the ages, in the consciousness of Europeans, is only an hour of world history for the human race, for India, for China, for Egypt, for the ancient peoples of South America.

Ethnically (*"t'ma"*), and historically (*"a single hour"*), Blok widens the frontiers of the concept *Scythians* towards infinity. Consequently, *Russia* too, in these iambics, is not only the geographical homeland, much less is it only *Russia mine, life of mine* or *Russia! My Wife*, as Blok had written not so long before, Russia has become the centre of gravity for world forces; it is *Russia in the October of 1917*. That is what his country has become in the eyes of Alexander Blok and, according to him, must become for his contemporaries in the West.

Behind the very movement of these powerful iambics, behind their intricate counterpoint, there is a dialectics which repeatedly widens the horizons of the historical scene. The untamed elements have been brought in – the destruction of Lisbon and Messina. Likewise the centuries-old bafflement of the human spirit before the Sphinx with its ancient riddle. Again and again, Blok makes us realise that the forthcoming dialogue with the West is no joking matter:

That Sphinx is Russia. Grieving and exulting,
And weeping black and bloody tears enough,
She stares at you, adoring and insulting,
With love that turns to hate, and hate – to love.

ately afterwards come the most quoted stanzas, and that are crucial for the meaning. They are crucial to himself, to the whole of Blok: with his sense of history, his ... for the nearness of Western culture, or, to be exact, of ... Western cultures, Romance and German (*The salt of ... wit so subtly shrewd, / And the grim genius of the German ...*)

Here Blok is the master of the situation, he is at home, in his favourite landscape. And he knows his subject!

In conformity with this, the iamb itself grows stronger and maturer, it becomes substantial and meaningful in a special way, it achieves the suppleness of Pushkin's mature verse

Yes, love! For you of Western lands and birth
No longer know the love our blood enjoys.
You have forgotten there's a love on Earth
That burns like fire, and, like all fire, destroys.

Behind this stands the whole of Russian nineteenth-century culture – Chaadayev, Herzen, Dostoyevsky and many other Russian thinkers who literally had to suffer to arrive at their providential and far-reaching, far-calling generalisations about the fate of world culture. As in many other cases, Alexander Blok links the Russian 19th century with his own historical times, which is to say, with all of us.

That is why the stirring close of *The Scythians* irrupts with such force into our days:

O Ancient World, awake! For the last time
We call you to the ritual feast and fire
Of peace and brotherhood! For the last time
O hear the summons of the barbarian lyre!

This means that the date written under the *The Scythians* should be put down as that of Soviet poetry's own birth. Any anthology of our poetry should begin with this poem!

Much has been said about the stubborn and universal conspiracy of silence and slander with which his recent associates met Blok's move to the Bolsheviks. They refused to shake hands with him. They shouted or whispered "Traitor"!

It was at this point that there arose the very convenient, for these people, myth of Blok's supposed political and civic irresponsibility, his so-called lyrical confusion.

But there is nothing of lyrical confusion in Blok's stern rectitude and his manly conscience. It took a powerful poetic gift combined with moral toughness to approach the Revolution and the people, as Blok did. But above all he had to love his country the way he did

We hear that note of that stern rectitude again and again:
"It is only worth living in such a way as to make immeasurable demands on life: all or nothing; to wait for the unexpected; not to believe in 'what is not on the earth', but in what should be on earth, even if it is not here now, and won't be for a long time. But life will *yield* this to us, for it is *beautiful*" ("The Intelligentsia and the Revolution")

And, later:
"Shouldn't we be ashamed of ourselves for ridiculing the illiteracy of certain announcements or letters which were written with a good but unsophisticated hand?. Shouldn't we be ashamed of ourselves for pronouncing the beautiful word 'comrade' in inverted commas?"

And, again:
"Peace and the brotherhood of peoples - that is the sign under which the Russian revolution is taking place That is what its current is roaring about. That is the music which anyone with ears ought to be able to hear" Finally.

"With all your body, with all your heart, with all your mind - listen to the Revolution."

Blok emerges as a thinker of a special mode and type One is reminded of the famous and remarkably apt words of Herzen, although they were said apropos of something quite different, in the foreword to Part Five of *My Past Life and Thoughts* "The reflection of history in a man met *by chance* on its road."

Blok was just such a man This is what accounts for his seismographic sensitivity to Russian and world life, the rare gift which could be prophetic too. In point of fact, however, his gift was more simple and vital. It was formed by the musical, nervously receptive ear of the artist in contact with his own *conscience* Conscience - something of which Alexander Blok truly had more than his share!

His conscience could encumber and hamper his decisions on occasion, but it led him unerringly and guided his every action on the main scale and each move on the smaller Conscience developed civic courage in him and a sense of responsibility to the people and society. This is what distinguishes Blok from most of the men of letters of that time. From this came the explosive force of the changes that took place in him during his short life - and the most striking of these was in October, 1917.

He once said.
"Gulture should be loved so much that its destruction should hold no terrors."

This is a characteristic and important admission for Blok. His innate sense of doom was always at hand and constantly making its existence known. He loved the air of his historic "discomfiture", but his spiritual and moral position remained active, vigilant and heroic.

He died prematurely without finishing what he had planned to do. Like Lermontov, who died even younger, Blok in large measure

...ived for us in rough drafts, in plans, in extracts, in various ... Like Lermontov, he knew "the power of thought alone", ... only creative disquiet, and, by virtue of its power ... was an artist without completion, without a continuation ... disquiet sought expression not only in lyrics, but in plays, ... only in creative art, but in philosophy and in journalism. However the morphology of these varied and contradictory searchings was integral and uniform. It was organic.

We have been trying to solve the enigma of his unified creative disquiet to the best of our ability. Future scholars will do the same. There is enough work to keep them all fully occupied.

Pavel Antokolsky

BOOK ONE (1898-1904)

From ANTE LUCEM
(1898-1900)

St Petersburg – Shakhmatovo

* * *

Let the moon shine – the night is dark.
Let life bring happiness to others –
Love's springtime in this heart of mine
Will not dispel the stormy weather.
The night is spread out over me
And looks down with a lifeless gaze on
The dull state of my ailing soul

filled with sweet and bitter poison.
... mily, keeping passions hidden,
cold gloom before the sunrise,
...ng the busy crowd I wander,
one thought only that I cherish:
the moon shine – the night is dark.
life bring happiness to others –
e's springtime in this heart of mine
...ill not dispel the stormy weather.

January 1898 St Petersburg

* * *

It's young she was, and beautiful too,
A madonna for no man's taking,
As bright as the sheen on the tranquil stream.
My heart was the nearer to breaking!..

So carefree she was, as the faraway blue,
A swan between sleeping and waking;
Who knows, but perhaps there was sadness too...
My heart was the nearer to breaking!..

But as she sang softly of love that is true,
My soul was in sympathy aching,
But passion was something her blood never knew.
My heart was the nearer to breaking!...

27 July 1898

* * *

Weary of daytime wanderings,
I leave the busy crowd sometimes
To recollect old sufferings,
To resurrect my former dreams...

If only I could once inspire her
With spring's joys on a winter's day!
But no, why should I seek to drive
Her girlish languidness away.

No longer need I soar in spirit
To her heights somewhere in the sky,
Where joy may glimmer for us sometimes,
But cannot be our destiny.

30th October 1898

HAMAYUN, THE PROPHETIC BIRD

(after the picture by V Vasnetsov)

On boundless waters that the sunset
Has bathed in purple light, she sings,
Uttering her dreadful prophecies,
Too weak to lift her trembling wings...
She prophesies the cruel Tatars,
She prophesies dire executions,
Disaster, famine, evil in power,
Righteousness doomed to swift destruction.
Haunted by antemundane horror,
The face is beautiful and good,
But the prophetic truth comes bursting
From lips all stiff and caked with blood!..

23 February 1899

* * *

Towards bliss I walked. My path was shining
With the red glow of evening's dew,
But in my heart a distant, dying
Voice sang of daytime born anew.
A song of dawn when sunset's radiance

ning and the stars were gleaming.
the sky's etheral oceans
vening's purple light were flaming!..
eart was burning; a voice at sunset
of the daytime born anew.
owards bliss I walked. My path was shining
With the red glow of evening's dew.

May 1899

* * *

TO K.M.S

Do you remember the city
Wrapped in blue mist far away?
Silently, we two together
Walked that erroneous way...
Walked, while the moon climbed higher
Over the walls that loomed black.
Maybe our way was the wrong one –
I never tried to turn back.
Maybe our love was illusion,
Maybe the path was a lure –
Still, the blue haze of the city
Stirred me – of that I was sure...
Do you remember the city
Wrapped in blue mist far away?
Thoughtlessly, we two together
Walked that erroneous way...

23 August 1899

* * *

Slowly the tardy autumn day is waning,
Slowly the yellow leaf spins in mid-air,

The light's so crystal clear, the air
so wondrous pure—
But soul cannot escape the unseen wear and tear.

And every day it grows a little older,
And every year the yellow leaf spins by,
And memory recalls, or just imagines,
That autumn never was so sad in years gone by.

5 January 1900

* * *

The poet in banishment and doubt
Stands at the parting of the ways.
The night's impressions flicker out,
Dawn's a pale gleam in distant skies.

But still the past vouchsafes no hint
Of what to wish or where to go,
And he, in banishment and doubt,
Must stay there, since he does not know.

But now his eyes are bright with hoping—
A mood of heart, not yet of mind—
That day will dawn, his eyes be opened,
And he shall glimpse a far-off land.

31 March 1900

* * *

Although, as formerly, the *singer*
Of songs about a world elsewhere
Must wear the crown of lyricism
In lines unrecognised, obscure,
The *poet* slowly nears his goal

And strives, inspired by truth alone,
Until beyond unknown horizons
He sees a radiant new dawn...

5 April 1900

31 DECEMBER 1900

You too, my young one and my sad one,
    Are taking flight!
I send you greetings, farewell greetings,
    Into this night.
I'm still the same tired sojourner
    On alien soil.
Like some late wayfarer, I wander
    On beauty's trail.
It shimmers and it smiles at me:
    One fear is mine:
My goblet will be overturned
    To spill my wine.
Meanwhile, there's silence all around me,
    No wine to sip,
The consciousness of early dying
    Leaves not my lips.
And you, a mystery eternal,
    Are taking flight.
Chance guest, I follow you, as always,
    Into the night.

31 December 1900

From LINES TO THE BEAUTIFUL LADY (1901-1902)

INTRODUCTION

Steep is the road. I toil up to the gate.
Lovely the evening. I knock and I wait.

Cold and aloof at so earthly a sound,
Calmly you scatter bright pearls all around.

Lofty the tower, there's a glow in the skies,
Red on the threshold the mystery lies.

Who set the towers in the sunset ablaze,
Towers that the Princess herself once raised?

Each little carved wooden horse on view
Breathes out a tongue of red fire at you.

Up towards the azure the cupola strains,
Crimson the gleam on the blue window-panes.

Meanwhile the church-bells are tolling away.
Bathed in the spring is the deathless array.

There in the sunset for me did you wait?
Kindle the tower? Open the gate?

28 December 1903

* * *

Borne on the breeze, the spring's music
Drifted from far, far away.
Somewhere an empty patch opened,
Radiant and deep in the sky.

Fathomless well in the heavens,
Dusk of the spring drawing near–
Storms of the winter were weeping,
Starry dreams floating in there.

Timidly, darkly and deeply
Strings of mine started to play.
Borne on the breeze came your music
Drifting from far, far away.

29 January 1901

* * *

The soul is silent. The same bright stars
Shine in a sky that's bleak and cold.



Sasha with his mother 1883

The people all around are making
An uproar over bread or gold...
The soul is silent, hears the shouting
And sees worlds that are far away,
But in its two-faced solitude
Makes wondrous things to give
away.
Gifts for its gods it is preparing;
Silent, anointed with sweet oil,
With ear untiring it's awaiting
The summons of a distant soul...
Even as the hearts unseparated
Of white birds near the ocean's foam
Send from behind the mists a summons
That's understood by them
alone.

3 February 1901

* * *

You went into crimson twilight,
Into circles without end.
I have heard faint footsteps echo
Far away from where
I stand.

Are you near, or are you wandering
Lost somewhere on distant heights?
Will there be a meeting in this
Silence that
reverberates?

Louder, louder are the footsteps
In the silence where I stand.
Lapped in flame, are you completing
Circles, circles without
end?

6 March 1901

* * *

We parted at the hour of sunrise

*A B**

The dreams of earth are still receding,
And alien lands still closing in,
Lands that are cold and strangely silent,
Lands without love, without a spring.

There, far away, with eyelids open,
The shades of all those near and dear
Pass into unfamiliar dungeons,
Regard them with an empty stare.

Son is not recognised by mother,
And passionate hearts lose all their fire...
And there my wandering shall falter
And end in infinite despair...

But, on the threshold of confinement,
I shall hear footsteps suddenly...
You shall complete the final circles
In silence, somewhere far away...

4 May 1901

* * *

The troubled dream of this life's consciousness
You shall at last shake off, yearning and loving

Vl Soloviev

I sense your coming. Year follows fleeting year —
With your mien still unchanged, I sense your coming.

The whole horizon flames, intolerably clear.
I wait and wait in silence, *yearning and loving*.

The whole horizon flames, your coming is at hand,
But I'm in terror lest you change your mien.

* Alexander Blok — *Ed*

But if you change your features in the end,
You will arouse suspicions bold and keen.

Oh, I shall sink, so grievously, so low,
Struck by the deadly features that I've seen.

How clear the horizon! Nearer comes that glow.
But I am *terrified you'll change your mien.*

4 June 1901
Shakhmatovo

* * *

Today in solitude you wandered,
Your hidden charms I did not see.
Up there, above your lofty hill-top,
A jagged forest stretched away.

That forest, ringed around so tightly,
Those mountain pathways lost to view,
Prevented mingling with unknown
And flowering with your azure blue.

22 June 1901

* * *

Do not expect a final answer,
For in this life it won't be found;
But on his way the poet clearly
Detects a far-off roaring sound.

He bends his ear with close attention,
Listening, acutely sensitive,
Till it's *in earshot;* then he hears it
Grow over greater, blossom, thrive...

Still nearer, and his hopes are rising,
But no—the shock's too much to bear...

The seer falls, struck deaf by hearing
That roar so near him in the air.

His family are bemused by prayer,
A funeral bell tolls solemnly...
Not theirs to attain the lofty
visions
He could not even bear to see!

19 July 1901

* * *

Will you wait till the sun's going down
For desire once more, and the boat,
And the oar, and the fire on dry ground?

Fet

Twilight, twilight of springtime,
Chill, chill the waves where
I stand.
Hopes in my heart other-wordly,
Wavelets caressing the sand.

Echoes of somebody singing,
What – it is hard to be sure...
Lonely the soul that is weeping
There, on the opposite shore.

Is it my dream near fulfilment,
Is it your voice from afar?
See the boat pitching and tossing,
Something is moving out there.

Hopes in my heart other-worldly,
Run – someone's coming to meet me...
Twilight of springtime, reflections,
Cries from the far shore to greet me.

16 August 1901

* * *

You are burning above the high hill-top
In your tower remote from the world.
I shall hasten to you in the evening,
In my arms a sweet dream I'll enfold.

You will kindle a bonfire at sundown
When you hear me approach from afar.
At the bidding of Fate, I'll be ready
To fathom the game of the fire.

And when through smoke and the darkness
The sparks whirl in shower upon shower,
Off I'll fly with those bright blazing circles
And find you up there in the tower.

18 August 1901

* * *

A plain that runs into the distance,
Burnt tree-stumps in their silent crowds;
Below, my own dear native valley,
And over it the spreading clouds.

There's nothing here to lure one further,
Even the faraway seems near.
A sense of dull and gloomy yearning
Hangs between heaven and earth out here.

By day and night without remission
It heaps up sand dunes in the plain.
Sometimes it wails pathetically,
Then suddenly falls quiet again.

And all that shall be, all that has been,
Is merely cold and soulless dust,
As are these stones above the graveyard
Of love, out here forever lost.

25 August 1901. Village of Ivlevo

* * *

Winter will pass, and you will see
My marshes and my plains out here.
Then you will say, "There is such beauty,
Such dead enchantment everywhere!"

But, girl, remember, in this silence
I cherished many a lonely thought,
In vain awaiting your soul's coming–
Rebellious, gloomy, overwrought.

I sought the answer in that twilight,
I looked chill death straight in the eye,
I stared into the mists and waited
For what seemed all eternity.

But you passed by, and in those marshes
I cherished many a lonely thought.
A gloomy trace of that dead beauty
Haunted a soul still overwrought.

21 September 1901

* * *

Early one fine misty morning
Sunlight shall beat on my face.
Will you, dear friend of my daydreams,
Walk up the steps to my place?

Let the big gates be wide open,
Windows admit the fresh breeze.
No one has heard for a long time
Songs as light-hearted as these!

With them, that fine misty morning,
Sunlight and wind in my face!
With them, the friend of my daydreams
Walks up the steps to my place!

3 October 1901

* * *

Once again, evening's shadows are nearer,
The clear daylight grows dim in the sky.
Once again, hosts of visions unearthly
Quiver, rise, and come drifting my way.

Why don't you, for this great encounter,
Reveal all that lies deep down within?
Do you feel there's some other precursor
Of the certain and imminent spring?

When I see your faint light in the darkness,
I shall rise and make haste to be there,
For even at dusk, you are closer
To life's motionless well-spring, my dear.

14 October 1901

* * *

Whether I write, or it's you from the grave
Sending your youth to me here,
Still I shall garland with yesteryear's roses
The phantom I hold so dear.

If I should die, then the swift birds of passage
Will chase the spectre away
And then you, too, will turn the pages;
"This was God's child," you will say.

21 November 1901

* * *

See, the snowstorm's covered up
Our traces in the night.

Now the rosy-hued and tender
Morning stirs the light.

See the crimson sky of morning
Shining on the snow.
Now the shore is bathed all over
In a hectic glow.

Blue ice-floe at noon I'll follow
Drifting down the stream,
Meet a girl clad all in hoar frost,
Real, not in a dream.

5 December 1901

* * *

To S Soloviev

The day's uncertain shadows are departing,
High-pitched and crystal clear the bells
are chiming.
The church steps are illumined in the sunset,
The stone's alive, waiting for you to climb it.

You'll pass this way, you'll touch
the cold stone
That wears the dreaded sanctity of ages,
And you'll perhaps let fall a springtime
flower
Here, in the gloom, by those stark images.

Indistinctly the rosy shadows lengthen,
High-pitched and crystal clear the bells
are chiming.
Darkness descends upon the ancient stairway...
Illumined here, I wait for you to climb it.

4 January 1902

There is so little time left for us
To marvel at these banquets here:
Mysteries shall unfold before us,
And distant worlds shine in the air.

January 1902

* * *

The day departs. And in the road dust
The sun's last rays are burning bright.
Their crimson glow irrevocably
Has mingled with my candle's light.

My night drifts on to meet another
And is, though dilatory, clear.
Let me not see the crimson glimmer–
That other night will soon be here.

And all that was beyond fulfilment
At dawn and through the troubled day,
Shall be accomplished in the road dust
At evening, in the sun's last ray.

1 February 1902

* * *

Dreamy thoughts past all fulfilling
Guard my every day.
See, the fiery shade of tardy
Visions comes my way.

All the rays of my own freedom
First glowed red out *there*.

Blizzards and inclement weather
Gird the temple *here.*

Visions are so perishable–
Can they be believed?
By the Universe's Mistress,
Loveliness ineffable,
I, poor, hapless, changeable,
May perhaps be loved.

Days of trysts and days of thinking
Keep their silent guard.
Should I wait for fiery madness
Of the youthful heart?

Should I, in the snowbound temple,
Visage hidden, stand,
Greet with wedding gifts the heralds
Of the coming end?

3 February 1902

* * *

We've a hermit's cell for dwelling,
 Where the water's high.
Spring is joyous, and the river
 Makes sweet melody.

But that joy come with due warning–
 When the storm winds blow,
Shimmering through our little doorway,
 Azure blue shall flow.

Trembling after years of waiting,
 We shall then take flight
Towards the open spaces, into
 Strange, mysterious light.

18 February 1902

* * *

And the Spirit and the Bride say, Come

The Apocalypse

I believe in the Glory,
Distant dawns I behold.
Universal light, shine
From the spring of this world.

All that's redolent of falsehood
Backs away and blenches,
There's a golden road leading
To the wide open spaces.

Forbidden are the lilies
I walk through on my way,
I see angels' wings beating
Overhead in the sky.

Now there streams and there shimmers
Unattainable light.
I believe in the Glory,
And Thine eyes are so bright.

22 February 1902

* * *

I love to visit great cathedrals
That overawe and yet inspire,
To go into the gloomy chancel
And lose myself among the choir.
I fear my double, two-faced nature,
And so I hide most carefully
My savage and satanic image
Behind a shield of piety.
In superstitious veneration
I pray for Christ's protection, while
Behind the rank hypocrisy

My lying lips curve in a smile.
Then furtively, with visage altered,
While the lights of the candles play,
I stir up thoughts about the Two-Faced
In people's memories while they pray.
And now the singers are in turmoil;
Silenced, they rush away in fear...
I love to visit great cathedrals
That overawe and yet inspire.

8 April 1902

* * *

We would meet as the day was declining,
You would slice through the bay with your oar.
I lost faith in the subtle illusion,
But I loved the white dress that you wore.

Our meetings were strange, we spoke little.
Just ahead, on the crescent of sand,
They were lighting the evening candles,
And pale beauty was on someone's mind.

But convergings, and mergings and burnings –
These are not what the azure blue needs...
We would meet in the mists of the evening
By the rippling waves in the reeds.

Neither yearning, nor love, nor ill feeling,
They will never return any more...
Your white figure, the funeral service,
And the shimmering gold of your oar.

13 May 1902

ON HIS GRANDFATHER'S DEATH

(1 July 1902)

His death or sleep was what we all expected.
The moments passed, weary, interminable.
A sudden breeze came through the open windo
Stirring the pages of the Holy Bible.

Out there, a man with snow-white hair
was walking,
Gait brisk and eyes that brimmed with merrimen
He smiled at us and beckoned with his finger,
And with familiar steps away he went.

And suddenly, those of us who were there,
Both young and old, all came to realise
Who'd been in front of us; we turned, trembling
To find the lifeless clay there with closed eyes...

But it was sweet to look on such a soul
And see its merriment as it went away.
Our time had come to love and to remember,
And mark a different kind of moving day.

Shakhmatovo

* * *

He that hath the bride is the
bridegroom, but the friend of the
bridegroom, which standeth and heareth
him, rejoiceth greatly because of
the bridegroom's voice

St John, III, 29

As a young man, I light the candles
And guard the censer's muted fire.
She, neither thinking nor yet speaking,
Smiles over on the other shore.

By the white church above the river
I love the sound of evening prayer,

The hamlet when the sun is sinking,
The pale-blue dusk that fills the air.

Enchanted by her look's affection,
Admiring beauty's mystery,
I stand and throw white flowers over
The churchyard fence in front of me.

A mist is falling. From the altar
In time the bridegroom shall step down.
Then from the jagged forest tree-tops
There shall blaze forth a nuptial dawn.

7 July 1902

* * *

I've run downhill into this spinney.
Round me the lanterns come and go...
My heart beats faster and more furious!..
They'll hunt for me till dawn, I know.

Will-o'-the-wisps are strangers to them,
Mine are the owl's nocturnal eyes.
Let them come running here to find me
Where the grass thick and tangled lies.

My marsh will suck them down, the turbid
Ring will close up and leave no trace.
And, upside down, my pallid spectre
Shall come and look them in the face.

21 July 1902

* * *

I am young, and unspoilt and in love,
Full of terror, and prayer, and yearning.

I'm a green and mysterious maple
Without fail towards you ever leaning.
My branches will tremble in prayer
When my leaves are all stirred by the breeze.
On the face that looks up at the stars
Are the sweet-smelling teardrops of praise.
Underneath my broad tent you'll take shelter,
At the lacy green pattern you'll gaze,
And you'll dream in the cool of my shadow
All these pallid and sleepytime days.
A mysterious dream I shall whisper.
You're alone, you're in love, you're with me,
And till dusk, full of yearning, I'm with you,
I'm with you, a green maple tree.

31 July 1902

* * *

I walked into the night, to fathom
A distant rustle, a nearby murmur,
To welcome non-existent beings,
To hear imagined hoofbeats' thunder.

The roadway, white beneath the moonlight,
Echoed with footsteps all around,
But all I saw was someone's shadow
Drifting across the hills and down.

I listened closely, then I heard it:
Out in the patchy moonlight's glow,
A horse's hoofbeats in the distance,
And someone's whistle, clear and low.

Further away, the sound was level,
And the heart slowly struggled on.
How could I tell from where that drumming,
From where that unknown voice would come?

A white horse gallops up towards me,
Its hoofbeats drumming louder, louder...

I see who sits there silent, laughing
Upon a saddle with no rider.

I walked into the night, to fathom
A distant rustle, a nearby murmur,
To welcome non-existent beings,
To hear imagined hoofbeats' thunder.

6 September 1902 St. Petersburg

ECCLESIASTES

Blessing the light, blessing the darkness,
Rejoicing in the harp's clear strains,
Look yonder into empty chaos
Down towards which your day declines.

Not yet unloosed the cord of silver,
And all the pitchers have been filled,
Almond trees flourish in the valley,
The air is moist above the fields.

You walk into the mountains, homewards,
The sun at noontide heats the air,
And, as you walk, the golden fillet
Glimmers among your jet black hair.

The grasshopper becomes a burden,
The caper blossoms ail and die,
And fears are in the way, and darkness
Has fallen on that which is high.

The keepers of the house have fled,
Outside, the sound of grinding's low,
The foeman's spectre haunts the people,
The trees bow in the vale below.

All have been struck with panic terror,
Man and beast likewise cringe and cower,

And those who once looked out the window
Now firmly bolt and bar the door.

24 September 1902

* * *

It happened late one crimson evening,
The herald star rose over Earth.
A new voice cried above the chasm –
The Virgin had just given birth.

Then to that voice, so thin and helpless,
Uplifted in a wail of grief,
There travelled in dismay an elder,
A king, a young man and a wife.

And there was miracle and portent,
For in the silence no one dared
To break, on horseback, in a chilling
Mask rose Judas from the crowd.

Full of concern, the lords sent out
The tidings over many a mile,
And on Iscariot's lips the couriers
Saw the beginnings of a smile.

19 April-28 September 1902

THE OLD MAN

To A S F

With all I cherished most forgotten
I live by reason cold and dry.
Once there were two of us together
In dream, not in reality.

I look at autumn's pallid radiance
And memory stirs, or so it seems...
But how can I believe the shadow
That flitted through a young man's dreams?

Was it all real or just imagined?
When old wounds, for a time, at least,
Spare me, I sometimes glimpse a vision
That melts away into the mist.

I don't believe in fairy stories,
Being old in body and in mind.
Let someone else seek out the portals
That I was fated not to find.

29 September 1902

* * *

One of the brilliantly closed circle,
He showed up at the graceful ball.
The lights winked balefully around him,
His gaze took in the crowded hall.

All night, the circle kept its distance,
All night, the dancers whirled around,
Until at daybreak in the window
Appeared the strangely silent friend.

He rose, looked up with owl-like eyes
And watched, attentive, all alone,
As Harlequin with cap bells jingling
Pursued the white-faced Columbine.

Then in the corner by the icons,
Lost in the crowd that surged and swayed,
Rolling his child-like eyes, poor Pierrot
Trembled, for he had been betrayed.

7 October 1902

* * *

Freedom looks out into the blue.
The window's open. Fresh the breeze.
The silver of the moon is gliding
Behind the crimson-yellow trees.

Come sundown, it will shine – a sickle
Over the harvest of the night.
But now it makes a last appearance
Before it slowly sinks from sight.

Even as then, the window quivers.
But now my voice, like this cool air,
Has sung its song, has long been silent
Beneath the rushes by the shore.

How pale the moon shines in the heavens,
How the fine hair gleams softly gold...
How the ear quivers on the corn stalk,
Forgotten, faded, dead and cold!..

10 October 1902

* * *

I enter the darkness of churches,
I practise a plain, humble rite.
There I wait for the Beautiful Lady
Where the icon lamps spill their red light.

In the shadows close by a tall column,
I start at a creak of the door,
But the face that regards me is only
An image, a vision of Her.

I am used to the robes that are worn by
The Majestic, Eternal Bride!
On the cornices high up above me,
Smiles, visions and fairy-tales glide.

O Holiest, how fair are the candles,
How consoling Thy lineaments are!
Though I hear neither sighing nor speaking,
I believe: Dearest one, Thou art here.

25 October 1902

* * *

On the wall so inert and so silent,
Mysterious signs are aflame,
While, crimson and yellow, the poppies
Bend down over me as I dream.

In the caves of night I take refuge,
From my mind the harsh miracles fly.
At sunrise, the pale-blue chimaeras
Watch the clear looking-glass of the sky.

I take flight into moments long over
And I cover my eyes out of fear.
In this book, as its pages grow colder,
I can see but a braid of gold hair.

The heavens are lower above me,
A black dream weighs upon me like lead,
For my foreordained death is approaching,
And great wars and great fires lie ahead.

October 1902

From THE CROSSING OF THE WAYS (1902-1904)

St Petersburg – Bad Nauheim – Shakhmatovo

*   *   *

Dreams of the unattainable return

Fet

Still pale is the glimmer of daybreak,
Far away, a cock heralds the dawn.

In the fields, a faint glow-worm winks
briefly
And goes out in the ripening corn.

The elder-tree's branches have darkened,
By the river a light flickers on,
And a herd of invisible horses
Gallops through the weird mist and is gone.

I ride on through the mournful meadows,
Repeating a mournful refrain.
Unattainable dreams fall behind me
And are lost, with my soul as their gain.

I whisper, composing a music
That's unlike any music I've known.
The grey branches are swaying, as if they
Had faces and hands of their own.

17 November 1902

* * *

Exhausted, and yet rich in wisdom,
Arising from my troubled sleep,
To Thee, Maid of the Golden Tresses,
My colours I most humbly dip.

No more the omniscient arrogance –
The erstwhile gloom is not for me.
I shall be loyal to the Temple,
Obedient in all things to Thee.

Winter shall pass – I hear already
The snowstorm singing far from here.
The royal vaults have been completed,
The soul is blissful. Thou art near.

30 November 1902

* * *

The dream began singing, the flower began blooming,
The day began waning, and soon came the gloaming.

I opened the window, the lilac was gay,
It happened in springtime, at the end of the day.

The flowers breathed their fragrance, and shadows were thrown
Of jubilant robes on the cornice of stone.

My soul was yearning, my heart was aching,
I opened the window, I was trembling and shaking.

My face felt a presence – I don't know whence it came;
She ascended the porch, singing, covered in flame.

September-December 1902

* * *

To Andrei Bely

For a year, not a creak from the window,
Not a groan from the heavyweight door;
For a long time, all was forgotten,
And then it was opened once more.

They brought out the old silver coffin,
Quickly crossed themselves, ran to and fro...
An old woman took one of the handles
And stumbled, so deep was the snow.

The crowd's calm, indifferent faces –
Curiosity there, nothing else...
And they soiled the chaste snow all around them
As they trampled a path for themselves...



1884

But, as he sank down into whiteness,
The dead man heard far, far away,
The blizzard strike up its own music
With a trumpet upraised to the sky.

6 January 1903

* * *

"Is it all quiet with the people?"
"Not with the Emperor slain."
Someone proclaims a new freedom,
Freedom that all can attain.

"Are they all ripe for a rising?"
"No, they're not doing a thing."
Someone has told them, have patience.
Meanwhile, they wander and sing.

"Who's been appointed to power?"
"Power they don't want, they all say."
Now civic passions lie dormant:
Someone is coming this way.

"Who is this scourge of the people?"
"Evil and black as a fiend."
Outside his cell, a monk saw him,
Straightway that monk was struck blind.

People he's driving like cattle
Into vast pits far away,
Wielding his great rod of iron...
"God! We must flee Judgement Day!"

3 March 1903

* * *

The dream that I dreamed was so happy;
I dreamed that I wasn't alone...

A noise woke me up in the morning,
I heard the ice rumble and groan.

It must be a miracle, surely...
But outside, with their axes well honed,
A throng of red people were laughing
And building their fires all around:

They were tarring their boats for the voyage...
The river sang out as it bore
Blue ice-floes and waves on its bosom,
And a thin, broken piece of an oar...

And, drunk on that cheerful commotion,
Soul learns what it never has known...
A thought from the springtime is with me:
I know that you are not alone...

11 March 1903

* * *

To S Soloviev

On graves long forgotten the grass has come
through.
We've forgotten the past... We've forgotten words,
too...
And silence holds sway everywhere...

By the death of departed ones wholly burnt out,
Are you not alive now? Are you not ever-bright?
Is your heart not the spring of the year?

Only here can I breathe, by these graves, where
sometimes
I once used to make up those amorous rhymes
On a meeting, it might be, with you...

Where first on my waxen, inanimate face
You wafted a life that was not of this place,

Like the grass on these graves coming
through...

1 April 1903

* * *

See the little man in black running through
the town,
Putting out the street lamps, climbing up his
ladder.

Slowly comes the daylight, very pale and wan,
With the little man in black, it's climbing up
the ladder.

Where the lamps at evening cast their yellow
stripes,
Where the night-time shadows were soft and mild
before

Now the morning twilight falls upon the steps,
Creeping through the curtains and the cracks
in every door

And the city in the dawn looks so pale and hard,
And the little man in black is weeping
in the yard.

April 1903

* * *

She was fifteen. Given her heart's desire
She might have well become my fiancée.
When, with a smile, I offered her my hand,
She laughed and turned away.

That was a long, long time ago. Since then
More years have passed than I would care to
We rarely met, said little to each other,
And yet our silences were all profound.

One winter's night, true to my inner vision,
I left the halls, packed and with lights ablaze
Where stifling masks smiled stiffly at the sing
And where I'd followed her with eager eyes

And then she came out after me, submissive.
Not knowing what was going to happen soon
Only the pitch-black night above the city
Saw them pass by and vanish: bride and groo

We met inside a church when all was silent,
One frosty, sunny and enchanting day
We knew those years of silence were not wasted
What was fulfilled then was fulfilled on high.

My song-filled heart is bursting with the story
About those long and blissful quests of mine.
From all these songs I have raised up a building;
The other songs I'll sing some other time.

16 June 1903. Bad Nauheim

* * *

When I finally go to my rest from these times,
I'll depart from abuse and from praise,
But remember the tender, affectionate dream
That inspired and enlightened my days.

I know, Radiant One, that you will not remember
The evil that tore me apart,
When, graceful and white, you drew nearer and nearer,
Like a swan, to the depths of my heart.

I never disturbed your pride and your
languor–
His alien power was to blame.
A cold, cold cloud overshadowed my day–
Your day was more radiant than mine.

You'll merely recall–when I go to my
rest
And vanish beyond the blue sky–
The song that I once used to sing with you,
And that you would repeat after me.

1 November 1903

THE FACTORY

Next door, the windows are all yellow.
As night draws on, as night draws on,
The people gather in the gateway
Until the squeaking bolts are drawn.

And then the gates are shut and
fastened,
And on the wall, and on the wall,
Someone in black, someone unmoving,
In silence stands and counts them all.

I hear him from my coign of vantage
With copper-throated voice ordain
That those foregathered in the courtyard
Should bend their tortured backs again.

They'll go inside and then,
dispersing,
Bale after heavy bale they'll heave;
And in the yellow windows–laughter:
Those poor were easy to deceive.

24 November 1903

FROM THE NEWSPAPERS

She rose by the Lights She blessed the children.
They dreamed a happy and beautiful dream.
Then, with her head almost touching the floor,
She made a low bow for the last time.

Kolya awoke with a blissful sigh,
Still dreaming, although not asleep any more.
The window-panes rattled and then were silent.
Somebody downstairs had slammed the door.

Hours passed. A man with a tin badge
On his big, warm hat came round. He tried
Knocking and waiting a number of times.
No answer. The children were playing inside.

A cold and merry Christmas-tide.

The children were playing at hunt-Mummy's-headscarf,
The one she put on as she left every morning.
Today, she had left the red kerchief
behind
They hid it away in every corner.

Dusk stole on. The children's shadows
Danced on the wall by the street-lamps' light.
Somebody climbed up the stairs, counting.
Came to the last. Wept. Stopped outside.

And knocked. They opened. In came a fat neighbour.
She'd brought them some broth. She made a big
fuss.
"Eat it," she said. She went down on her knees,
And, bowing like Mummy, made the sign of the Cross.

Mummy's not suffering, rosy-cheeked children.
Down on the railway she laid her head.
Thank you, thank you, dear fat neighbour.
Mummy just couldn't... It was very sad...

Mummy's all right. Mummy's dead.

27 December 1903

* * *

Down by the river, a sick man reeled.
Beside him a lumbering wagon train rolled.

A fair was en route for the smoking wen.
Lovely the gypsy girls, drunk their men.

They joked and they screamed as they rode down the track.

The man struggled on with a bale on his back.

He begged a lift home from the gypsy band.
A girl bent down and she reached out her hand.

He ran to the wagon as quick as he could,
And on to it hoisted his cumbersome load.

The strain was too much, there was foam on his lips.

The gypsy girl took on her wagon a corpse.

On the seat right beside her she gave him a place,

The dead man lurched forward and fell on his face.

And, singing a song of the free, happy life,
She drove the dead husband back home to his wife.

28 December 1903

* * *

Harsh the wind howls on the bridge through the pillars,

Under the snowdrifts there hums a black thread.

Miracle speeds beneath my sleigh runners,
Miracle sings to me over my head..

Miracle world, you've turned heavy and
dreary–
Songs that you sing, snow, and bonfires aglow..

Miracle, leave me, I'm tired and I'm weary,
Miracle, vanish back into the snow!

28 December 1903

* * *

My beloved, my prince, my bridegroom,
In your meadow of flowers you're forlorn.
On the opposite bank I have blossomed
Like a plant in the ripe golden corn.

I am catching your dreams as they pass me
Like a palely translucent white flower.
When I'm in full blossom, you'll crush me
Like a weary and white-chested charger.

Oh, trample the immortal within me–
But for you I shall cherish the fire.
I shall timidly light a church candle
During prayers in the pale morning hour.

You will stand in the church, white of visage
To the queen of the heavens you'll go–
I shall sway like the flame of the candle,
You'll respond to the thrill that you know.

Up above you, I'm quiet as a candle,
And before you, as sweet as a flower.
I am waiting for you, my dear bridegroom,
Still your bride, and your wife evermore.

26 March 1904

PRAYERS

Our Argo[1]

Andrei Bely

1

Here we guard the temple doorway,
Slaves most dutiful.
Faith we treasure, heights we measure,
Till the trumpet's call.

Tomorrow always. At the grating
Every day and hour,
One of us is lauded by a
Voice distinct and clear.

Air is filled with exhalations,
Fraught with thunderous hoping,
And the height's aflame because of
Eyelids ever open.

Rose-red angel shall commend her,
Saying, "See her string
Beads upon a thread and tie them–
She, Eternal Spring".

At the radiant hour, receding
Storms we'll hear, we two.
Hands clasped, *silent*, we'll go *sailing*
Far into the blue.

March-April 1904

BOOK TWO (1904-1908)

INTRODUCTION

Thou art gone to the plains past returning.
Hallowed be Thy name!
Once again the red sunset trains on me
Its shimmering lances of flame.

On an evil day only, I'll carry
My lips to Thy syrinx of gold.

And if all my entreaties are fruitless,
Then, dismayed, I shall sleep in the field.

Thou shalt pass, all in gold and in purple,
But I must not behold Thee again.
Let me rest in this world ever dreamy,
Kiss the ground where Thy radiance has been.

Tear my blighted soul out of my bosom!
Rest and peace with the saints let me find.
Thou that holdest the lands and the oceans
Ever still in the palm of Thy hand.

16 April 1905

From EARTH'S BUBBLES (1904-1905)

The earth hath bubbles as the water hath
And these are of them

Macbeth

THE PRIEST OF THE BOG

On a spring-thawed patch
At his evening devotions, watch
The tiny priest of the bog.

His cassock over that spot
    Is a black
And almost invisible dot.

In the unruffled glow of the sunset's light
There aren't any nasty *little imps in sight*,
But evening's allure
Wraps slender arms around him tight...
Sounds before night -
A faint rustle somewhere.

And quietly he prays,
He smiles and he bows,
Tipping his hat.

And he succours an ailing
And limping frog with healing
Herbs for its injured foot.

He makes the sign of the Cross:
"You'll be able to hobble across.
I rejoice at all
Creatures that crawl,
All animal life,
And every belief."

And quietly he prays,
While tipping his hat,
For the stem that sways,
For the frog limping home,
And the Pope of Rome.

Don't let the quagmire distress you...
The little black cassock will come to the rescue.

17 April 1905

AUTUMN DANCES

It's your will, ever secret and hidden,
To arouse me again and again.
Joy will wait till the cherished word's spoken,
The gold cloth has already been woven
To bring mirth to this spirit of mine.

Autumn smiles through a shower of teardrops,
An entreaty goes heavenward flying,
And beyond the fine lace of a birch-tree
A trumpet of gold begins playing.

And the transparent strains are as thrilling
As your voice when I hear it nearby,
But you're silent, with arms both uplifted,
With both arms reaching up to the sky.

Voluptuous, rounded, they tremble,
From white shoulders the waters are falling,
And behind you, the nymphs of the autumn
Dance on, their robes splashing
and swirling.

You have loosed your hair's tumbling tresses
As the shower wraps you round in a veil,
And your dancers spread out ever wider
In a bright golden ring through the vale.

And I cannot help singing and dancing,
I'm entranced by the song of the rain,
And the meadows and vales can't help burning
Wherever your footsteps have been.

With us, to us comes youth on light pinions,
We are destined to live in the air...
And from where comes the Joy that approaches,
And the Silence comes floating from where?

The silence of corn that is dying–
That's a time when the whole world is gay;
A dream full of symbols, much cherished:
Today passes, like yesterday;

And the flights of the times and desires
Are but maidens' hands flung to the sky–
On the earth, on the green of the glade
An unbreakable ring of pure joy.

And our silence will never be broken
Or enraged by the untroubled sun,

And the springtime will never, no, never
Be forgotten by forest glade's green.

On the sides of the gully, the snowflakes
Will cover and level the rim
Where the rains have bequeathed them their
message,
Where you danced, where your will was supreme.

1 October 1905

From MISCELLANEOUS POEMS (1904-1908)

* * *

I have ascended all high places,
Have gazed on many an alien sky,
My torch was God's dew in the morning,
At night – the owl's great staring eye.

"Come, follow me!" your eyes implore me.
You trust in casual words of mine,

As if I'd raise the cup of poison
Up to my lips a second time!

But no! I've covered up my traces,
Destroyed the evidence with fire!
All that I've left unsung, forgotten,
Shall not return before the Star–

That Star, whose nearness having fathomed,
A hundred times I'll pay my share
For all the pettiness and greatness
Whose burden I am doomed to bear!

15 March 1904

* * *

Sleep wasn't easy that winter,
    Cruel the winds and the snows...
We couldn't break up the frost-bound
    Soil with the shares of our ploughs.

Early we'll stroll in the meadow
    Through summer dews, and our scythes
Ringing shall mow the lush grasses,
    Laying them out in green swathes.

Let the big gates be wide open,
    Windows admit the fresh breeze.
No one has heard for a long time
    Songs as light-hearted as these!

5 November 1904

* * *

For strength of spirit, you have hammered
The shining sword-blade long and hard.

You're birds. For any new encounters
Be sure the spirit is prepared.

The sighs of thawing Earth are languid,
The thin ice darkens, cracks appear.
Oh, guess what woman's voice is calling
Behind that mask, shy and demure!

Crossways shall point to far horizons
And, like a call, the dark turn blue.
In refuges of light and warmth
Shall fallen maidens shelter you...

The road is clear to far horizons,
But, as you strive for them, take heed,
In case the bronze voice of the belfry
Comes thundering down upon your head!

November 1904

* * *

Then they charged. Straight at
the breast-bone
Came the glittering bayonet.
Someone shouted, "Hallelujah!"
Someone whispered, "Don't forget!"

Someone fell, arms flailing wildly,
Then the ranks closed over him.
Underfoot, someone was struggling,
Who – no time to take it in.

Only in a cheerful memory
Was a candle lit somewhere,
On and on they thundered, trampling
That warm body lying there.

No one's destined to grow older –
Death from mouth to mouth is passed...

Fury blazes ever higher,
Far ahead lies bloody waste...

Gnashing shall be all the louder,
Pain more sweet, life swifter spent.
Afterwards, the earth will try to
Soothe the affrighted firmament.

January 1905

* * *

She was a very happy bride,
But death had singled her out. She died.

Her mother buried her in that ground.
In a weed-green lake the church was drowned.

Above the deeps where the wavelets toss,
There sails a single, unmoving cross.

Though hundreds and hundreds of years have
There's still no youth in the old home.

Weary of waiting for youth to arrive,
The aged mother is still alive.

She passes threads through a needle's eye,
Their shadows shake on the floor nearby.

Quiet as it will be. Light as before.
Years pass – she's forgotten to keep the score.

As old as the world, hair white as snow,
She never will die – no, never, no.

By chest of drawers and ancient chair,
The flies, as ever, dance in mid-air.

The red threads lie on the floor where they fall
There's a mouse in the corner behind the wall.

In the mirror depths—a chamber below:
The same old woman, hair white as snow.

The same red threads, the same mice,
The same old icon in the same old place.

More dark than the lake is the dark frame,
With the modest gaze that's for all time..

The eyes have long been lustreless, dead,
The ball of thread is cheerful and red.

And, deeper below, a succession of chambers,
And the same garden looks in at the windows

As green as the world, as high as the sky,
As sweet as the daughter who had to die...

"Come back, the thread doesn't want to decay,
Oh leave me in peace to pass away."

3 June 1905

THE PUPPET BOOTH

The puppet booth's open, a joy
To children above all things.
The little girl and the little boy
Watch demons, fine ladies and kings.
That music is truly hellish,
The fiddle miaus and mews.
A horrible demon grabs Potbelly
And out spurts cranberry juice.

Little Boy

He'll be saved from the Black Terror
By a hand that's slender and white.
You can tell by the light
On the left, coming nearer!

See the torches, blazing bright?
It's the Queen, it's the Queen all right!..

Little Girl

No, why do you tease me that way?
That's only the Devil's suite.
The Queen goes about in the light of day,
All hung with garlands of roses sweet,
And sighing knights, with swords that sway
As they carry her train, *they're* the royal suite.

The Clown leans over the front of the stage,
And shouts, "Help, help!
I'm bleeding cranberry juice!
I'm tied with a piece of cloth,
I'm wearing a cardboard helmet
And carrying a wooden sword!"

Boy and girl weep when they hear the Clown.
The merry puppet show closes down.

July 1905

THE POET

She sits at the window with father.
Over the seashore, jackdaws flock.

"Rain, rain! Come down faster!
I've got a brolly on a stick!"

"It's spring far away. You're a prisoner of winte
Poor little girl in the rose-red hood.
See the waves foaming under the window?
Let's fly over the sea for good."

"Is Mummy out there?"

"Oh, no!"

"Where's Mummy?"

"She died."

"What does that mean?"

"It means there's a fool of a poet I know,
He weeps for something all the time."

"What for?"

"For a hood as red as a rose."

"Has the poet lost his Mummy as well?"

"Oh, no. That's not the point.
He wants to sail over the seas
To where the Beautiful Lady dwells."

"Is she kind-hearted, the Lady?"

"She is."

"Then why don't we ever see her?"

"Because she will never come to this place.
She doesn't travel by steamer."

Night steals over the water.
End of chat between father and daughter.

July 1905

BY THE SEA

Half the horizon is glowing,
And the sun will soon disappear.
"Look, father, oh look –
There's a ship and it's coming here!"

"Oh daughter, then we would do better
To leave this shore and take flight...

See – over the waves to us bright ones
It's bringing the darkness of night."

"Oh, no, look again, father:
What a colourful flag it flies!
How high is the sound of its singing!
How its beacon dazzles the eyes!"

"But that is a siren singing.
We must go without more ado...
Look, a mist is crawling towards us,
And the ship has already turned blue..."

But his daughter begins to weep,
For she's heard the call of the deep,
And she wants to swim out to the blue,
Just to make her dream come true.

July 1905

AUTUMN FREEDOM

Now I'm out upon the open highroad,
Gale wind blowing – bushes toss and sway,
Broken rocks dispersed about the hillside,
Thin and meagre seams of yellow clay.

Autumn's running wild through the wet valleys,
Baring to the view earth's cemeteries.
Far ahead, in hamlets by the wayside,
Glows the vivid red of rowanberries.

There it is, my gaiety that dances,
Jingling, jingling in the shrubs somewhere!
And your sleeve, with brightly coloured
patterns,
Signals like a summons from afar.

Who inveigled me on to this highroad,
Smiled on me as in my cell I lay?

Or was it a mere psalm-singing beggar
Called to travel down that stony way?

No, I was not summoned on this journey;
Let the going, then, be light enough!
I shall hear the voice of tipsy Russia,
Rest my limbs beneath a tavern roof.

I shall sing about my own good fortune,
How I drowned my youth in drunkenness;
Weep upon the sorrow of your ploughlands,
And forever love your boundlessness...

Many of us – free, and young, and graceful –
Never loving, find eternal sleep...
Shelter us within your vast horizons!
How can we, without you, love and weep?

July 1905 Rogachevskoye Highway

* * *

A girl in the little church choir was singing
Of all who pine on an alien shore,
Of all ships outward bound for the ocean,
Of all who remember their joy no more.

Up into the dome her voice went soaring,
And on her white shoulder a sunbeam shone,
And in the darkness, all watched and listened
As the white dress sang in the light of the sun.

And all imagined that joy was nearer,
That ships had found their haven of rest,
That weary people in alien countries
Had found a happier life at last.

Her voice was sweet and the sunbeam was slender,
But high at the Holy Gates, as in pain,

An infant close to the mysteries wept
That nobody ever comes back again.

August 1905

* * *

In the howling cold of the night out there,
I sought for a ring in a field of stars.
And see – there's a face in the lacework pattern,
In the lacework pattern a face appears.

Her snowstorm trills come floating over
And draw the brilliant stars in a train;
Like a summons, the jingles ring out a crescendo
On the blizzard's upsurging tambourine.

With a gentle crackling the fan was scattered.
Ah, what it means – not to drink or to eat!
But eyes looking north bring me, cold as I am,
Tidings that burn with inspiring heat.

And, twining shrouds above the instant,
In stars of blizzards wrapped all around,
Away you drift into snowy twilight,
My own forever predestinate friend.

August 1905

* * *

Now the bright wind's dying down
And grey eventide draws on.
On the pine branch settling,
Raven plucks a sleepy string.

In a land so dark and alien,
What will you recall of me?



How I loved you tenderly?

Though your soul is not forever,
Two things will desert you never:
Your stern young man's pride, and my
Woman's steadfast loyalty.

Do not drive away the phantom
As it passes in a whirl,
If you think that you'll be happy,
Dearest, with another girl.

Now good-bye! On draws the night.
Lower is the swallows' flight.
    Stormclouds gather in the skies,
    Night looks deep into your eyes.

21 August 1905

* * *

Straight across the untamed steppeland
On a foaming steed flies she.
"Will you clank your chains forever?
Come outside and dance with me!"

And she waves outside my window,
And her cry burns fiery red.
How she beckons, how she dances,
And she strokes her faithful steed!

"You refuse? Then God be with you!"
Dust rolls up towards the skies.
Over pathways, over highways,
Swift across the steppe she flies.

I am not your true-love, maiden,
You, whose life is free as air.
Stolen treasures are your true-love
And the robbers' midnight fire.

Terrible you are in beauty,
In the steppes amid the mist,
With your braid, all red and tangled,
Hanging loose about your waist.

31 October 1905

*THE TALE OF THE COCKEREL AND THE OLD WOMAN**

The old woman looks round for her cockerel,
Her cockerel as bright as the day!
His cage never opened unaided,
There's mischief somewhere on the way!

On the carved white porch up above
There's a flash of a bright golden comb..
The old woman climbs down from the stove-shelf
And she hunts for her crook round the room.

There's a sudden fierce light at the window,
And the old woman's eye is aglow...
It's as clear as broad daylight out yonder,
With the whole of the village on show.

What kind of a pass have things come to,
I can't find that crook anywhere...
Oh, confound the thing, where has it got to?..
But there's panic about in the air:

There he stands in the corner, all shining,
Underneath his hat—two beady eyes...
In the street, all snow-covered and sleepy,
There's hubbub, and running, and cries.

They all rush to the old woman's cottage,
The quick-witted have snatched up a pail...

* In folk-lore, the cock, or cockerel, is symbolic of fire.—*Ed*

There's the corpse, in a heap of black cinders,
Of a thing that was tiny and frail...

Oh, you hunted around for it, Grandma,
But your crook had just vanished, it's true...
And you lost your bird into the bargain,
But your bird, in the end, he found you.

Nothing left of the place but a chimney,
And the winter wind round it blows cold...
And a dead eye still seems to be looking
For a long-vanished cockerel – of gold.

And just over the wind-scattered cinders,
Where the cockerel once used to roam,
Now there fades, now there blazes up brightly,
The gold of a pert little comb.

11 January 1906

SOLVEIG

To Sergei Gorodetsky

Solveig comes up on skis
Ibsen "Peer Gynt"

Solveig, you came to me swift on your skis,
You smiled at the springtime skies.

I was living alone in my poor, dark hut,
Many days, among rocks, without light.

But you glanced at me with your merry green eye,
And I swung up my axe to the sky!

As I fell an old pine, I laugh and I sing;
I am meeting my bride – the spring!

My hut shall be new
Under skies that are blue
Under skies that no tree-tops shall hide.

Yours are those heavens!
And mine are those heavens!
Let me rightly be famous for pride!

Life was dream all the time,
I sang hymns to the pine
That had spread all its beauty up there

When you came, there was light,
Winter's dream soon took flight,
In the forest, spring hummed everywhere.

Can you hear my axe ring? See the joy in my gaze
When I'm looking deep into your eyes?

Can you hear me? I swing up my axe and I sing
Of Solveig, my maid of the spring!

At each blow of my axe, with voice lifted
in praise,
The tree in the azure sky sways.

More clear your voice rings than the song the pine
sings,
Solveig! The song of the spring!

20 February 1906

* * *

I knew her many years before
During those fabulous times of yore.

Tyutchev

The years have passed, but you're unchanging:
Stern, beautiful and clear as day;
Save that your hair is brushed more smoothly
And in it gleams a hint of grey.

And, browsing through a pile of volumes,
A tall but bent old man these days,
With one thought past all understanding,
I look upon your tranquil face.

The years indeed have *wrought*
We live and breathe just as before,
And, in remembering, have truly
Preserved those *fabulous times of yore...*

The tall urn's claimed their radiant ashes,
Our spirit's radiant in blue mist,
And it's more wonderful, more precious,
To breathe on earth the distant past.

30 May 1906

GUARDIAN ANGEL

I love you, my Guardian Angel: you throw
Your light on my darkness wherever I go.

Because you became my betrothed one fine day,
Because you once took my own secret away.

Because we were bound by the secret of night,
And you were my sister, and daughter, and bride.

Because we are destined to live a long life,
Oh, even because we became man and wife!

Because of my chains and because of your vows,
Because we are doomed by a family curse.

Because you don't love all the things I hold dear,
Because my heart grieves for the needy and po

Because we can't make a harmonious pair,
Because I would kill and yet never would dare—

In revenge on the cowards who live without fire
And dragged all my people and me in the mire.

Who locked up in prison the strong and the fr
Who always distrusted the fire that's in me.

Who for money would steal my clear daylight away,
And for dog-like devotion are willing to pay...

Because I am weak and prepared to back down,
Because my forefathers were slaves, every one.

The evil of softness has poisoned my life,
This hand is not destined to lift up a knife...

I love you as much for my weaknesses too,
For your own bitter fate and the strength that's
in you.

Nobody will touch the remains of what's dead,
What was burned in the fire and is sealed up with
lead.

With you I once looked at red skies all aglow,
With you I look into the chasm below.

The order is twofold that destiny gives;
We're the freest of souls! We're malevolent
slaves!

Give in! Be more daring! Don't leave me! Go away!
Fire or dark – which is coming our way?

Who calls? Weeps? And where are we going, and why?
You and I – both forever – together – you and I!

Shall we rise again? Perish? Just die?

17 August 1906

* * *

Train with shimmering stardust sprinkled,
Azure, azure, azure gaze.
In between earth and the heavens,
See the whirling bonfire blaze.

Life and death – eternal cycle.
All in silken raiment clad,
Open to the Milky Ways,
You are hid in thundercloud.

Now the stifling mists have fallen.
Light, go out; darkness, descend...
You held out to me a flambeau-goblet
In your slender, white and alien hand.

I shall hurl it high into the heavens
And a milky way will shine.
You alone shall rise above the desert
To unfold a comet's train.

Let me touch the folds of silver;
Coolly, calmly, unconcernedly,
Know how sweet it is, my way of anguish,
And how easy it can be to die.

September 1906

OLD RUSSIA

You are unusual, even sleeping.
I shall not touch your robe at all.
There's mystery beyond my dreaming,
And in that mystery you dwell.

Old Russia, girt by rolling rivers,
Ringed round by forests everywhere,
With cranes upon the wing, and marshlands,
And the magician's clouded stare.

Where peoples of such different visage,
From vale to vale, from land to land,
By the glow of the burning village,
Spend the nights dancing hand in hand.

Where country sorcerers and warlocks
Cast spells to make the corn crops grow,

And witches sport and play with demons
In the great wayside mounds
of snow.

Where blizzards howl around the cabin
And bury it up to the roof,
And where, to greet her faithless
lover,
The jilted maiden whets a knife.

Where crook of traveller and pilgrim
Has worn the crossroads and the ways,
And winds scream in the naked branches
Singing the tales of olden days.

So I've acknowledged in my dreamings
My native country's neediness,
And in her wretched rags and tatters
I hide my own soul's nakedness.

I've trod the sad nocturnal pathway
Up to the churchyard, and in there
All through the night among
the gravestones,
I have sung many a heartfelt air.

I did not know and could not fathom
For whom I meant my singing art,
What god I passionately believed in,
What girl I loved with all my heart.

Russia, my living soul was cradled
By you in your immensity,
And see, it did not even sully
Or stain the primal purity.

There's mystery beyond my dreaming,
And in that mystery you dwell.
You are unusual, even sleeping.
I shall not touch your robe at all.

24 September 1906

MOTHER AND SON

To my mother

The son is making the sign of the Cross,
The son is quitting his father's house.

There's golden happiness in the songs
Sung by the mother he's leaving there:
May he return all covered in glory,
May joy be not too much to bear!

And so, in armour dazzling bright,
Into the night hear him depart.
To impious ones he vows his spirit,
To mother earth he vows his heart.

The cocks are crowing for morning prayers,
The night in utter terror flees;
Behind its back, the husky horn
Of mists in the morning blows.

The mosses raise their tangled curls
Above the flowery meads,
Looking aloft with owl-like eyes
High up into the fleecy clouds...

There goes my son in a shining cloud,
The helm of the morning sky;
Into the forests and wilderness
He lets his well-barbed arrows fly!..

Down from the heavens' azure blue
A cleansing, fine wind blows.
The son takes off his helm and down
His deadly sword he throws.

And, pierced right through, his breast is oozing
Blood and praises from on high:
All hail, horizon, liberated
From misty night's dark misery!

And still there's golden happiness
In the heart of the mother he left back there:

Here he is, my son, all bleeding!
May joy be not too much to bear!

The son has not forgotten her cry:
The son is returning home to die.

4 October 1906

* * *

The Princess sang about the springtime
So tunefully, so rapturously,
Until I said to her: "Wait, Princess,
Since you are going to weep for me."

She laid her hands upon my shoulders,
And this is what I heard her say:
"Gird on your sword. Prepare for battle.
I shall protect you on your way.

Go now. Return still young and loyal
To duty as you ever were.
I shall preserve my icy coldness,
Locked up inside a crystal tower.

There shall be joy in contemplation,
And quietly the years shall pass.
The eternal rustle round the castle,
The moat, its water clear as glass...

Yes, I expect a late reunion,
But I'll reach out to you, my dear,
As you come riding home from battle
With spring impaled upon your spear."

Over the castle, tower and you,
A dark blue pall is settling.
Princess, farewell. Long is my journey;
I go to fetch the fiery spring.

October 1906

* * *

You can walk round the church entirely
Over the fresh green grass,
And sit upon the mossy steps
And quietly weave your lace.

You can cast down your eyes demurely,
Should I walk past you there,
And straighten out your cotton jacket,
If I should chance to stare.

Your eyes are still completely guileless,
As is the blue cornflower;
No city hat would ever go with
Such long, thick ropes of hair.

And yet you wear a scarlet headband,
You nibble sunflower seeds;
You give the young telegraphist
More posies than he needs.

And so you'll gladly walk across
The damp grass, coming to
The mist of someone else's garden,
If I should send for you.

October 1906

* * *

I look for lights–lights for my journey
Into your dark, bewitched domains.
Now red, amid the dark and turbid
Backwater pools, the great moon shines.

Its double sails above the forest
And will be turning golden soon.
Then shall the spirits of the marshes,
Water and forests freely roam.

The imp shall use the fir-tree summit
To pierce the gold coin in the sky;
Long shall the pipes play, cowbells tinkle
Across the river, far away.

The road leads further, the moon climbs higher,
In silver light the stars turn pale.
And rooftops shine in the nocturnal
Village that lies upon the hill.

As I walk on, the dews turn colder,
Turn silver, silver without end
For you inside the hut, your tresses
Unbraided for your secret friend.

Give me a fragrant, stifling potion,
Let the sweet poison dull my brain,
Let me taste your delights and never
Forget that night with you again.

October 1906

THE SHOW BOOTH

Come on, old nag, let's go
And rattle off our Shakespeare[1]

Kean

Over the black slush on the roadway
The ground mist hovers, will not go.
The undertaker's horses, groaning,
Pull at my tatty fairground show.

Harlequin's face, seen in the daytime,
Is even paler than Pierrot's,
And Columbine hides in the corner
A bundle of her motley clothes.

Pull, pull away, you funeral horses,
And players, practice well your art,
That the itinerant truth may surely
Bring joy and grief to every heart.

There's rot deep in the soul's recesses,
But we must weep, sing, ride along
That easy paths be opened up to
The heaven of my alien song.

November 1906

* * *

Solveig! O Solveig! O Way of the Sun!
Give me more air, let me breathe once again!

Down in dark chasms where thunderstorms rise,
See those two green and malevolent eyes.

Is it you watching, or old woman-owl?
Whose is that voice in the darkness so foul?

Whose blinding, fluttering cape in its flight
Shows me the way that leads up to your height?

Up in the mountain, the hunting horns blow,
Meadowlands flower at your bidding, I know.

Let me rest where the cliff ledge offers room!
Let me but splinter this mirror of gloom!

So that the shaggy trolls, howling and screaming,
Slip and fall down, like the heavy rain streaming.

So that, above the soul cleansed, golden day
Brightly shall shine for me, filled with great joy.

December 1906

* * *

Conceived at night-time, born at night-time,
    I screamed, mature outright:

So grievously my mother groaned,
So blackly yawned the night.

But when the twilight had turned paler,
Drab day brought in its train
A round of tedious, trivial things,
A dismal, joyless chain.

When I was small, an organ played
Whatever will be, will be,
Outside our ground-floor window, so
I took to poetry.

Amorousness glowed in my curls
And too-soon mournful eye.
In rosy chains by many a woman
Held prisoner was I.

Everything went *as it must go* –
Love, melancholy, verse,
And the serenely flowing river
Took all things in its course.

As night is blind, so I was blind,
Thought to live blindly, too...
They opened up the gloomy vault
And said: "*God be with you.*"

That night, the gleaming ice-floes travelled,
It was the autumn flood.
I thought, "That is the river moving,"
And so I followed suit.

That night, the river was in darkness,
All round was black as pitch,
And then she came, mysterious Stranger,
And stood upon the bridge.

She was a living, blazing fire
Of mingled wine and snow.
Who was she? Look into the longed-for
Eyes and you shall know.

She took me gently by the hand,
Gazed on me tenderly.
A white mask and a shining ring
She then bestowed on me.

"Enough of living, leave your words,
I'm strident as the snow,
For by another life I love,
By different fires I glow."

She calls to me. She beckons me.
Snow fills all heaven and earth.
What sings to me? What rings for me?
Another life? Or death?

12 April 1907

TO A GIRL

To him, you're just a pliant flower,
To you, he's just a beast, no more.
Don't tempt him with a smile, don't answer
When he comes knocking at your door.

And if by force he makes an entry,
Slip round behind the door and wait.
There'll still be time in that unfriendly
Dwelling to set the walls alight.

And if the hour of shame approaches,
Then turn away and face the wall.
Tie a loose knot in your black headscarf,
And hide a needle in that ball.

And let the sharp point pierce the brutal
Flesh of his rough, exploring palms,
When, screaming out in pain and anguish,
You struggle wildly in his arms.

And let him, blinded by the moment,
Forget at reeking passion's height

The angry weal upon his shoulder
Imprinted by your frantic bite.

6 June 1907

* * *

When I was fashioning a hero,
Pounding the flint and splitting layers,
Oh, what eternal peace and quiet
The earth was filled with in those years!
But, in the heavens, light and darkness
Were locked in struggle even then,
And in the inky storm there fluttered
A brightly coloured garment's hem...
And in a gap between blue storm-clouds
A shield shone, dazzlingly bright;
And through the clouds a sword-blade darted,
Unswerving as a ray of light...
Not manifest the wondrous visage,
But in the dawn I see that face;
Into the eyes of heaven's lightning
In fear and trembling now I gaze!

3 October 1907

From THE CITY (1904-1908)

* * *

Eternity's flung at the city
    A sunset of tin.
Heaven's rim is all ragged,
    In the streets there's a din.

All my useless conjectures
    Are just weighing me down.

Factory windows tell stories
Of wild nights on the town.

And the tin roofs give shelter
To the hopelessly crazed.
Heaven cannot come down
To this city of trade.

Oh, this air's full of sound,
And illusion persists.
Side-street, lead me away
Into smoky-blue mists...

26 June 1904

* * *

Now the city's turned its lifeless
Face towards the horizon's red,
And has drenched its greystone body
In the sunset's crimson blood.

Walls of factories, gleaming windows,
Overcoat of grimy russet,
Loosely fluttering lock of hair –
All are coloured by the sunset.

Horses golden as a heat-wave
Shake their manes all sparkling red,
Maddened monsters of rapacious
Clouds race swiftly overhead.

Red the cleaner, splashing pails of
Crimson water here and there,
And the lone streetwalker wiggles
Fiery hips out on the square.

High up in the old church belfry,
Booming like a brazen gong,

See the great bell dancing wildly,
Sticking out a bloody tongue.

28 June 1904

ANTHEM

The heavenly smith has rolled into the dusty city
A changing disc of fire.
And out in the streets, there's a noise like
a million sa\
That snarl, and scream, and roar.

Here, in the window, where quietly flowed
A murk as thick as treacle,
A sunbeam stabbed the molten heart of the window-pan
Like a needle.

All in their frightened, drunken crowds
Are leaving the tombs of their houses...
Look – flattened under a factory chimney
Is one who never carouses.

He's dug his finger-nails into the brickwork,
He looks a real sinner, sprawled there...
But the heavenly smith gives a puff of
the bellows,
And a white-hot flail whistles through
the air.

And there's a woman who hadn't the nerve to fall–
Spreadeagled upon the sunwarmed stones she
lies...
Her bosom is bare, and incipient passion stirs
Between dark brows...

Yonder a monk is going
Somewhere in a hurry with downcast eyes...
But even for those who make lunatic vows

Who sing dispassionate hymns of praise
A thunderstorm's brewing!

To all who bare their breasts to the sun in yearning,
At crossways, in cellars, on towers – all praise!
To the sun, the audacious sun, persistent, burning,
Our voices in hymns, songs and dreams we raise!

Needle, golden bright!
Darkness pierced by a giant ray of light!

To all sunburned, annihilated, consumed outright –
Praise!

27 August 1904

* * *

They emerged from the darkness of cellars,
And their heads were set low on their necks;
The sound of their footsteps grew louder,
And the noise of their strange dialects.

Then legions of newcomers followed,
With pickaxes and shovels in hand.
They went swarming all over the roadways
And raised palaces out of the ground.

Then a street rose up, dismally grey,
With spidery threads interwoven,
The tide flowed along with a murmur,
And the coaches could hardly keep moving.

Day retreated far into the distance,
A red glimmer was all we could see,
But the unseen flood flowed into
Our city as into a sea.

We abandoned our quests and surmises:
Let our places be taken by others!

They were born in like sorrow, and suckled
With like joy at the breasts of their mothers.

In the pall of the daytime's departing,
Our own destiny's meaning was clear:
The last sunset combined and commingled
All its colours for us out of fire.

We were guarded by no raging dragon,
We endured no Gehenna of torment.
Time's waves very quickly engulfed us;
We were fated to last but a moment.

10 September 1904

* * *

In the taverns, the side-streets, the byways –
An electrical waking dream –
I sought those of infinite beauty,
Those forever enamoured of fame.

All the streets were half-tipsy with shouting,
There were suns in shop-window displays.
Oh, the charm of those feminine faces!
'Oh, the men with their arrogant gaze!

These were tsars, to be sure, and not rovers!
I went up to an old man nearby.
"Was it you that adorned their slim fingers
With those pearls that no fortune could buy?

Did you give them those furs of all colours?
Were they kindled with sunbeams by you?
Did you paint their lips vividly scarlet,
Did you tint their arched eyebrows dark blue?"

The old man never gave me an answer,
Went to dream somewhere else, out of sight.
But I stayed there, mysterious, radiant,
Just to drink in that music of light.

But they all went on walking straight past me.
And each one hid the hope in her breast
That she'd fly into blue realms forever,
Being different from all of the rest.

And as couple sped by after couple,
A bright angel, I hoped, would appear,
And initiate two into heaven
In the pavement's excitement, down here.

But a dwarf was observing us, huddled
On a dangerous ledge, very high;
And to us, it was like a red banner,
That bright tongue poking out in the sky.

December 1904

* * *

See, on those big shallows
Life's barge gone aground.
Cries and shouts of workers
From afar resound.
On the empty river –
Singing and dismay.
Someone strong takes over
In a coat of grey,
Shifts the wooden rudder,
Gives the sail a [illegible],
Slides the boathook over,
Presses with his chest.
Now the red [illegible]
Slowly swings away.
Soon, the coloured [illegible]
Glide more [illegible] by.
Now they're looking [illegible]
Almost lost to view,
But it's most unlikely
That they'd take us too.

December 1904

STORY

To G Chulkov

In windows, curtained with a pattern of wet dust,
Was the silhouette of a woman with head bowed.
The grey pedestrians eagerly carried past
Their burden of evening gossip, of faces weary
and cowed.

Directly in front of the windows a street lamp
stood,
And, brightly persistent, at every pedestrian
flung
Its rays, and in that pattern of rain, neither
white nor black,
Each vanished from sight completely, neither
old nor young.

They were like ghosts of a lifeless capital city,
Stepping at random, casually out of the crowd.
Backs disappeared and faces swam up from
somewhere,
Timid, submissive to the drabness of low cloud.

Then, with a startling suddenness, curses rang out
That cut like knives through the curtain of rain
out there.
Bareheaded, a girl in a scarlet dress
Was lifting a little child into the air.

Bright and persistent, the relentless beam shone
down.
Suddenly, the girl, a street-walker, with all her
might
Dashed her head violently against the wall
With a scream of frenzy, throwing the baby out
into the night...

Grey apparitions of sodden boredom crowded round
her.
Someone shook his head and loudly sighed.



1894

There on her back she lay with outflung arms,
In the grimy scarlet dress, on the blood-stained
road.

Her eyes were still open, however; the bold stare
Was looking for someone on the upper floors of
the house,
And found, and met in the window behind
the curtain,
The eyes of the dark woman wearing lace.

Their looks met and froze in a soundless wail,
The moment lasted... The street waited and waited,
But after a while, the blinds were pulled down,
And below, in the open eyes, the strength faded...

Faded and died. Again in the pattern of rain,
Jarring, unmusical voices were heard once more.
Somebody took the weeping child in his arms
And, crossing himself, furtively dried a tear.

Above, the window-panes were suspiciously silent,
The thick white curtain was empty in the streaming
rain.
Someone solicitously smoothed the child's damp
lock of hair,
And went away slowly. And wept again.

January 1905

A LITTLE SONG

It's singing there inside the chimney.
Gaily the little voice is piping.
Gloom has floated down upon you.
In the next room, your child is weeping.

The spring! The spring! The air's so empty!
The evening is so bleak and bare.
See the drab ghost of endless boredom,
That stunted willow bush out there.

And now the evening swathes the window
In shadows of unbroken white.
Your eyes, so terrible of aspect,
Cast on my face their baleful light.

I'm not afraid to look straight at them,
Of thought and care my soul is free!
The storm blows out the fire, the sparks
Have sailed into Eternity...

Your eyes are like two candles burning.
Why does she yearn so, keen and wild?
We'll learn. Or else the glittering rapiers
Of your mad eyes shall stab that child.

9 April 1905

* * *

I spoke to you of things unwordly,
I forged all in the aetherial dark.
Axe in my boat. In my dream – heroes.
Thus to the earth I moored my bark.

The seat inside my boat is coloured
The blood red of my anguished dream.
But I look for courageous beauty
In every house, in every home.

I see what blindness ails your maidens,
What fire the young men's vision lacks.
Go back! Into the chill vault's darkness!
You need a whip and not an axe!

The time is near when I must leave you,
And you shall see me over there,
Far, far beyond the misty mountains,
Flying high in a cloud of fire!

16 April 1905

He spoke intelligently, strongly,
His eyes were hardly bright,
Yet seemed to radiate directly
Lustreless glints of light.

And down below were fixed upon him
Thousands of pairs of eyes,
And that his last hour was approaching
He did not realise.

His movements came of self-assurance,
His voice was firm and hard,
His jet-black beard shook rhythmically
With each impassioned word.

Grey as the night-time vault of heaven,
Through all things he could see.
The gross chains of Emancipation
He shook with certainty.

But names and dates were more than those
Below could ever follow,
And not one of them bore the brand
Of duty or of sorrow.

And then the lights began to tremble
A murmur raised its hand.
There was a stirring, like the rustle
Made by a falling brand.

As if a light had pierced the darkness,
Or hint had just been dropped...
The crowd woke up. A wild, wild whistle
Shrilled briefly and then stopped.

A stifled groan followed the tinkle
Of shattered window-panes.
The speaker, with his skull cracked open,
Fell to the paving stones.

I do not know who threw the missile
    That killed him where he stood,
But I remember on one column
    A rivulet of blood.

More whistles shrilled and pierced the air,
    And shouts, and cries and roars.
But he had gone to rest eternal
    Beside the entrance doors.

A faint light glimmered in the doorway,
    Then other lights winked on...
The bolts of rifles rattled loudly
    Beneath the vaulted dome.

The fitful lighting half-illumined
    The victim's outstretched body,
A soldier stood guard over him
    With rifle at the ready.

The black beard emphasised by contrast
    The whiteness of the face.
The soldiers then came on in silence
    And each took up his place.

And in the sudden hush that followed,
    The victim's face was bright.
A gentle angel had flown over,
    And joy was infinite.

The eyes were motionless, wide open;
    Peaceful and stern they seemed.
Above them, neatly ranged in order,
    The rifle bayonets gleamed.

As if, behind the grim black muzzles
    Across the entrance, he
Had truly breathed the sweet,
                                        nocturnal
    First breath of liberty.

10 October 1905

* * *

The monarch in the lyric morning
To autocratic sleep's inclined
That hangs above the world-famed city
In dust of bygone days confined.

His forebear, regal in cast iron,
Crushes the serpent as before.
The many-stringed voice of the rabble
On the Neva has yet no power.

Already flags fly on the houses,
New fledgelings are already trained,
But silent are the river waters,
The sombre palaces are blind.

Though manifest the face of freedom,
The serpent's face appeared there first,
And of the glittering, scaly segments,
Not even one has yet been burst.

18 October 1905

* * *

Still beautiful is the grey of heaven,
Still void of hope is the grey horizon,
Still more unfortunates ask for bread,
But all despise them, all despise them!

And over the waters, the voice of the rabble
Is lost in the River Neva's own dream,
And savage outcries: "Down with them, down!"
Awake no sympathy in that stream...

A glimmer of grey in the sky has clothed
The Winter Palace, home of the tsars.
The knight in black* will give no answer
Till sunrise catches him unawares.

* A statue on the roof of the Winter Palace – *Ed.*

He'll redden above the watery chasm,
Bring down his sword, and to no avail
Be killed while fighting the untamed rabble,
And all for an ancient fairy-tale...

18 October 1905

SATIETY

They've always made me suffer cruelly:
Even at the virgin daydream's height,
They've just been bored, they've not been living,
They've crumpled flowers all frail and white.

But now, in salons and dining-rooms,
Above these ladies, young and old,
Over the dull society dinners,
The electricity has failed.

Candles are placed upon the tables,
Yellow rings show on every face.
The parchment conversations crackle,
Their wits can hardly keep the pace.

And everything that's sated, grumbles,
Full bellies rumble in alarm;
The feeding trough has been tipped over,
There's trouble in their mouldering barn.

A dismal lot has fallen to them:
The electric lighting won't come on.
Ears are assailed by hunger marches
And the red laugh of flags unknown!

Let them live out their lives as usual–
Why trouble their satiety?
But it's indecent for young children
To imitate their old ennui.

10 November 1905

THE STRANGER

Above the restaurants each evening,
The air is close, warm, stifling,
And raucous drunken shouts of greeting
Float on the foetid breath of spring.

Far off, above the dusty side-streets,
Above the drear suburban skies,
The baker's sign gleams faintly golden.
Somewhere a fretful infant cries.

And every evening, past the crossings,
With bowlers tilted, cocksure swells
Go promenading with their girl-friends
Along the banks of the canals.

Over the lake, the creak of rowlocks;
A woman's voice shrills suddenly.
Inured to all, the lunar disc
Leers fatuously up in the sky.

And every evening in my wineglass
I see my one and only friend,
By the mysterious, bitter potion,
Even as I, subdued and numbed.

Close by me, at the neighbouring tables,
The sleepy waiters stand about,
The drunkards have the eyes of rabbits:
In vino veritas! they shout.

And every evening, at the appointed
Hour (or is this just a dream?),
A girlish form in silken garments
Stirs in the misty window pane.

She threads her way among the drunkards,
Never escorted, all alone,
And slowly breathing mists and perfume,
Sits by the window on her own.

And ancient, long-forgotten legends
Float from her swirling silken things,

The hat, trimmed with black plumes of mourning,
The slender fingers sheathed in rings.

Enchanted by the nearness of her,
I look beyond the veil's dark film,
And see a far shore of enchantment,
And a remote, enchanted realm.

Unfathomed secrets are vouchsafed me,
Somebody's sun is made my own.
Deep down into my soul's recesses
The acrid, bitter wine has gone.

And ostrich feathers, lightly drooping,
Are swaying slowly in my brain,
And fathomless blue eyes are radiant
On the shores of that far domain.

Locked in my heart there is a treasure,
At last, at last, the key is mine!
Yes, you are right, you drunken monster!
I know it now. There's truth in wine.

24 April 1906
Ozerki

* * *

Before the twilight hour, descending
Into the swirling gloom below,
I saw out in the murk before me
My sister's features, full of woe.

She walked along with soundless footsteps.
Behind her, all the darkness stirred,
And in the dales and in the gullies
The sighs from countless breasts were heard.

Whence into rain and cold, dear sister,
Do you go with this dismal throng,
Whom famine's scourge drives to a living
Death of eternal wandering?

And then she slowly came up to me
And held her torch high in the night,
And all that is not seen on earth
Was bathed in gentle, flickering light.

And there, in ditches by the roadside,
Shuddering all over, I could see
The signs of torments past describing,
And bodies writhing helplessly.

Once more the guttering torch was lowered.
She smiled and left without a sound,
As nebulous and as aetherial
As was the darkness all around.

I still cannot forget those faces,
The empty eyes that could not see,
And that long file of famine's victims
Forever stands in front of me.

September 1906

A COLD DAY

It was in church that I first met you,
A blissful garden was our home,
But now through evil-smelling courtyards
To curses and hard work we've come.

We've walked past all the factory gateways,
And in each window we have seen
How heavy lies the yoke of labour
On every back bent low in pain.

And now we've come to our new dwelling
With a low ceiling overhead,
Where people have abused each other
Worn out with toil till nearly dead.

You held your skirts up, lightly threading
Your way through sleepers on the floor,

But even sleep was like invective
In that foul corner over there...

You looked at me over your shoulder
As if I could allay your fears,
And down my cheek there slowly trickled
A single, shining, drunken tear.

No! Happiness is sheer illusion –
Our youth went from us long ago.
Toil ages people prematurely:
I wield the hammer, you must sew.

So sit and sew, look through the window;
Work harries people everywhere,
And those for whom life's somewhat harder
Sing endless songs, hour after hour.

I shall be working close beside you,
You won't remind me of the time
When, looking at the tumbler's bottom,
I drowned my heart's despair in wine.

September 1906

IN OCTOBER

October has arrived. How dull
    And drear the capital!
A weary chestnut pony wanders
    Around the yard at will.

As light as thistledown, a snowflake
    Flutters upon the wind.
A scraggy-looking little fir-tree
    Tosses upon a mound.

Oh, life was easy, life was young,
    But now my time is gone.
A boy is shivering, blue with cold,
    Out in the yard, alone.

And everything shall go on being
    Just as it was of old:
The pony and the little urchin
    Do not enjoy the cold.

And I've been sent with no good reason
    Up here into the loft.
No one has listened to my theories,
    I've no tobacco left.

But, of my own free will, I want
    The life that's also free.
Since I began to drink, there's been
    No happy star for me.

The star's lost in my wineglass – surely
    Not till the end of time?..
But now my soul's cheered up once more –
    It's back, that star of mine!

Look, look – it sails across my vision,
    Sways in the window-pane...
And now the real life is beginning,
    And wings shall soon be mine.

And when I go, I'll even take
    All of my property.
I've found my own true powers at last!
    One shout, and I can fly!

I fly, I fly to that small boy.
    Through whirlwind and through fire.
All shall be as it was of old,
    Save that I won't be here!

October 1906

* * *

Night. The city has simmered down.
Behind the big window

All's quiet and solemn,
As if the man were dying.

But he just stands there sadly,
Distressed by failure;
His collar open,
He's looking up at the stars.

"Stars, stars,
Why am I so sad?"

He gazes up at the stars.

"Stars, stars,
Where does this yearning come from?"

The stars tell everything.
Everything's told by the stars.

October 1906

WINDOWS OVER THE COURTYARD

I've only one hope still remaining:
It's to stare right down into the well
Of the courtyard. It's dawn. And the washing
In the half-light gleams spectrally pale.

I hear come to life far beneath me
The language of long, long ago.
Forgotten on somebody's window,
The slim yellow candles still glow.

On a roof alongside the eave gutter,
There's a hungry cat stealthily creeping.
To weep – that is all I have left now,
And to watch you there, peacefully sleeping.

You're asleep, and outside all is quiet,
But I'm ready to die of ennui,

And a foul, hungry demon is knocking
At my temples inexorably.

Hey, sun, take a look through my window –
But no, you'll pass by and be gone.
I'm just like the sun in the winter,
I'm just like that foolish old sun.

October 1906

* * *

Around my lair I wander,
Downcast and gloomy-eyed.
The dismal organ-grinder
Will come and sob outside...

About the life of freedom
That I shall never share,
About the roving steppe-wind,
And springtime in the air.

But why should that concern me?
I wander, lost, alone.
The pendulum goes *tick ... tock...*
The candle's burning down.

My one hope's in the window
Down there that I can see.
The clothes she wears are radiant,
She'll come and visit me.

And, frowning, I shall tell her –
And for the hundredth time –
How I have irritated
So many friends of mine.

Again we'll find contentment,
Tranquillity and peace...
The icon lamp is burning,
The heart is at its ease.

Why does she come so often
To talk to such as I?
Why does she pass the merry
Thread through the needle's eye?

Why does she chat away
With such blithe cheerfulness?
Why does she bow her head
And shyly hide her face?

How cold it is, how poky
In here when she is gone!
The lamp that's in her window—
When will it shine again?

My face is even whiter
Than is the spotless wall...
Again I will be nervous
Next time she comes to call...

There's nothing to be scared of
And nothing need be lost...
Must I admit my feelings?
Must they all be confessed?

What can I tell my shy one?
That my gloom's put to flight?
That with the wind come snowflakes?
That my room's full of light?

7 December 1906

THE FIRE

Leaping, darting into sight,
    Tongues of fire are on the wing,
Golden splashes of the night,
    Town moths flitting, fluttering.

Smoke has curtained off the building,
    Dark crowds rush there, flowing past.

In the distance, something's rumbling,
Other lights are coming fast.

Shouts are flung like coins in handfuls,
Glittering golden through the air,
And above the foaming horses
Spreads the torch's crimson flare.

With their wheel-spokes spinning, blurring,
Come the chariots like a whirlwind,
And the mounted bugler leads
High above the affrighted crowds.

Hooves ring over cobblestones,
Subtle voice of throaty bronze,
And the street's wide-running river
Bursts its banks and flows right over.

On the helmets glittering bravely
Snowy dew is gently falling...
Children of the night, where are we?..
Whose can be those voices calling?..

No, the buildings must stop burning;
No, we've been deceived once more
By that faraway uprising's
Steadily advancing roar.

December 1906

* * *

You look the clear dawns in the eye,
But lights are what the city offers,
The seaside smell in little back-streets,
The music of the factory hooters.

In this unconquerable chaos,
The soul is misty, languishing...
A red cape flutters yonder, a woman's
Voice sings like a violin.

Your thoughts are very far from daring,
Like folds in any modern gown...
And women go about so often
With eyelash-arrows pointing down.

Whose windows through the fog are shining?
Who in the half-light caught your glance?
Restaurants here are bright as churches,
Which open, like the restaurants...

Swift to incurable deception
The soul goes rushing, but in vain:
Everything – restaurants, girls' glances –
Will vanish at the appointed time.

December 1906

IN THE ATTIC

In this airy attic
High up in the sky,
I see rooftops, chimneys,
Taverns far away.

That way is forbidden –
But, indeed, what for?
See, she's all I'm tied to,
See, I've closed the door...

But she doesn't hear me,
Hears, but doesn't look;
Silent, isn't breathing,
White-faced, doesn't speak...

She's no longer hungry...
Wind screams in a gap.
Nice to hear the blizzard
Playing on its pipe.

Wind, you snowy storm-wind,
Good friend all my life,

From THE SNOW MASK (1907)

Dedicated to N N

SNOWS

SNOW WINE

So, sparkling from within the wine-cup,
Again you've taught my heart to fear
Just with your smile, so sweetly guileless,
Framed in those writhing coils of hair.

I'm overturned in sombre currents,
And, without loving, breathe anew

An old, forgotten dream of kisses,
Of snowstorms everywhere round you.

And you respond with wondrous laughter,
You writhe inside the cup of gold,
And there, above your furs of sable
A dove-blue wind is running wild.

Gazing into those living currents,
Could I not see myself as crowned?
Could I not recollect the kisses
Bestowed upon my face upturned?

29 December 1906

SECOND CHRISTENING

The blizzard's blown my door wide open,
It's cold inside this room of mine
As in a bright new font of snowflakes,
I've been baptised a second time.

Entering my new world, I know
That there are people, there are deeds,
And he is bound for paradise
Who the dark ways of evil treads.

I'm weary of my love's caresses
Here on an earth that's cooling now.
The priceless gemstone of the blizzard
Gleams like an ice-floe on her brow.

Pride in my second christening
Has turned my heart to ice, I fear.
You promise me more precious moments?
You prophesy that spring is near?

But see how full of joy my heart is!
Snows bar the firmament from sight.
There'll be no spring, and none
is needed:
Death is the third baptismal rite.

3 January 1907

HER SONGS

In no stifling earthly prison
I destroy you.
Yield, and let the aetherial vessel
Skyward bear you.
Understand with soul compliant:
I adore you.

Raise your clear eyes to the heavens
Wonderingly.
Let your iron sword fall down
Helplessly.
Tame your heart that flutters,
trembles
Fruitlessly.
Whirl the snows above the chasm
Endlessly.

With my sleeve of snowstorms I shall
Strangle you.
With the silver of my laughter
Deafen you.
On the aetherial carousel
Bewilder you
In a strand of my long tresses
Tangle you.
With a heady snow-hop brew
Befuddle you.

4 January 1907

BEHIND THE MASKS

Stars behind the masks were glowing.
Someone's tale was gently smiling,
And the night was passing by.

And the pensive conscience, sailing
High above the chasm, slowly
Carried time itself away.

Hands, once stern, now held a goblet
Filled with liquid clear as glass
On the chambers night descended,
Slowing down its pace.

Moments jingled one by one,
In the heart, the liquid rang,
In the glass, aflame no more,
Danced a green light, glittering.

On their shelves, the books dozed on,
And a naked cherub clung
To the old carved cupboard door,
Fluttering on one wing.

9 January 1907

THROUGH THE WINE CRYSTAL

Long the legend,
    In it, lurking,
Strikes the hour appointed.

Sombre mask, and
    Sparkling
Eyes behind it.

There was never sadder mantle
    Or more slender waist...

"Mister Poet, you're much nicer
Than I ever guessed."

"Russian's not your line," I scold her,
"Learn it for my sake"...

And upon the dark-clad shoulder,
On the shoe tip – ever bolder –
Dreams the silent snake.

9 January 1907

THEY READ POETRY

You see, I muddled up the pages
While your eyes blossomed. In the wind
Made by the wings of some great
snow-bird,
A blizzard blotted out my mind.

How strange the things the mask
was saying!
Did they make sense to you? God knows!
You're very sure: books contain
legends,
But life itself is merely prose.

To me, you are inseparable
From the dark river and the night,
From mists that hover, scarcely
moving,
From rhymes like merry points of light.

Do not you, too, be strict with me,
Or tease me with the mask you wear.
In my dark memory, do not touch
That other, far more terrible fire.

10 January 1907



1898

Now the heart would court disaster.
Heart so light, then, slip away.
See how, with their snowy silver.
Paths have led me far astray.

As from yonder ice-hole, water
Sends thin steam into the air,
So with almost silent footsteps
You have lightly lured me here.

Lured me here, chained me with glances,
Held me in your soft embrace.
To a white death you've condemned me
With the coldness of your gaze.

In what other home or dwelling
Must I drag my weary steps,
If the heart would court disaster,
Yearning for the lower depths?

12 January 1907

THE HEART COMMITTED TO THE SNOWSTORM

Last of the needles, glitter bright
Out in the snow!

Arise, fire-breathing dark of night!
Stir your snow-dust and blow!

Slay me, as I once slew
My dear ones long ago.

I loved, but have forgotten who,
I wrapped my heart in snows that blew,
I hurled my heart down mountain ways
It lies far, far below!

I walk into your bonfire's blaze!
Consume me!

Fly to me,
O winged gaze,
With needle of snow fire run through me!

13 January 1907

ON THE SNOW-FIRE

Now the flames are soaring over
Him that has been crucified.
Nights drift by across the heavens,
Past all caring, snowy-eyed.

Young nights pass like sisters, spinning
Winters out of fleecy snow,
And they look with eyes wide open,
Stir up white smoke down below

And with eyes winged as for flying
Tenderly the height looks down.
Flicker, gentle flame, dart nearer
To the cross and wrap it round.

In your snow-mask, gentle knight,
In your snow-mask you must burn!
Have I not made music sweet,
Loved and kissed to your delight
From the dusk until the dawn?

Be you then my true-love also,
Gentle knight, I'm fair to see.
Gentle knight, with my pure snow-blood
I have proved fidelity.

For three nights I was your true-love,
Coiling, calling tenderly;

Let you look into my eyes,
Gave you wings that you might fly.

Burn, then, radiant and shining,
And with light and gentle hand
I shall scatter your light ashes
All across this snowy land.

13 January 1907

From FAINA (1906-1908)

* * *

Then you came. Put all your charming
Girl companions in the shade,
And my soul entered the circle
Foreordained to it by fate.

And I saw your features blossom
With a torrid, snowy moan.

On the jingling troika races
In snow-white oblivion.

With your jingling bells you lured me,
Far across the fields I strayed...
With black silks you suffocate me,
Throw your sables open wide...

Does the wind weep by the river
For that freedom, vast and wild;
Jingling bells and lights together
Surge and dwindle in the field?

Tightened is your golden girdle,
Brazen, modest, fierce your gaze.
Let the moments all deceive us,
Fall into the bonfire's blaze!

Let deception, let your silks be
Sung of by the roving wind,
And may other people never
Know how slender is your hand!

How behind the veil of darkness,
Far horizons were revealed...
How the snowy-white horizons
By the falling dark were veiled...

December 1906

* * *

I was bewildered and light-hearted:
Your dark silk seemed to mock at me;
But when your heavy curtains parted,
Silence descended instantly.

With living fire the radiant circle
Of footlights separated us.
The music sounded, to transfigure
And burn the lineaments of your face.

See, once again, the candles shining,
The soul alone, the soul half blind. .
The lustre of your gleaming shoulders,
The audience out of its mind...

A star, from this our world departed,
You're far away above the land...
And now the silver Grecian lyre
Is shining in your outstretched hand...

December 1906

* * *

You left. But hyacinths were waiting,
Dawn did not make the window bright,
And in the light folds of a mantle
There bloomed the silence of the night.

In the slant beams of *dust at evening,*
You will, I know, come for a while
To intoxicate and captivate me
With scent of Lilies of the Nile.

I know those hands, so frail and helpless,
That voice's soft and whispering tone,
The languor of the graceful figure,
The sloping shoulders' muted sheen.

But in your name there's something boundless,
Your eyes' subdued and russet light
Harbours a lurking treacherousness
And stormy legends in the night.

And, to the real world submissive,
You do not know, of all the throng,
What rituals you're celebrating,
To what persuasion you belong.

Walk in, unconscious of volition
And let your gaze on me be kind,

And with a dark look of keen anguish
Stab at this living heart of mine.

Waylay me like a lurking viper,
And stun me at the midnight hour,
Torment me with your languid kisses,
Strangle me with your braided hair

31 March 1907

* * *

To my mother

I planted my bright paradise
And fenced it round when that was
done.
Into my world of clear blue skies
My mother came for her dear son

"Where have you gone, dear son of
mine?"
Silence. The sun ascends the sky,
And slowly and unfailingly
Shines on the vale of heavenly wine.

The mother walks all round with care
The gardens that are my behest:
She calls once more, trying her
best
Not to disturb a single flower.

All's quiet. Does she not realise,
A heart matures behind the fence?
They need not former joys, who've
once
Tasted the wine of paradise?

April 1907

AUTUMN LOVE

I

When, in the damp and russet foliage,
The rowanberries burn like flame,
When with a bony hand the headsman
Drives the last nail into my palm;

When, above leaden-rippling rivers
On some hill, damp and colourless,
Before the eyes of my harsh country
I dangle, writhing on the cross;

Then, staring far and wide before me,
Through my last tears of blood, I'll see
Christ in small boat sailing over
The river's wide expanse to me.

With the same hopes his eyes are shining,
He wears the same torn, tattered clothes;
A nail-pierced hand looks pitifully
From underneath the humble robes.

Christ! They're so sad, my country's spaces!
My strength up here begins to fail!
And your boat—will it find its mooring
At this, my crucifixion hill?

3 October 1907

* * *

On those bright, empty nights when bridges
Look down into the silent river,
They met almost like strangers, showing
No sign of fondness for each other.

Each of them glowed with youth and beauty,
But, moved by all the emptiness,

She hid a coldness, strange, uncanny,
Behind the untamed loveliness.

And, ever careful of his feelings,
He could not, would not love at all
She only loved to rouse the beast
In him, then hold that beast in thrall

Alien, he pressed her alien hand.
The North, anxious to help allay
The pain of such sweet, tender boredom,
Hastened to turn night into day.

So, in that bright nocturnal wasteland,
Not hastening into night's embraces,
Their doomed and yearning soul gazed upwards
Into the sky's pale azure spaces.

10 October 1907

VOW BY FIRE AND DARKNESS

My thanks, my heartfelt thanks for all of this
For passion's torment borne without a murmur,
For rue of tears, the poison of a kiss,
The enemy's revenge, the false friend's slander,
The soul's fire wasted in the wilderness

Lermontov

1

O spring without end, without limit,
O dream without bounds, without end!
I acknowledge you, life! I accept you!
My shield rings a welcome in sound.

I accept you implicitly, failure,
And success, I accept you as well!
There's no shame in the magic of weeping,
Or in laughter's mysterious spell!

I accept the nights spent up in quarrels,
And the light when the sun starts to rise,
So that spring may intoxicate, dazzle
My inflamed and long-suffering eyes!

I accept the far-flung, lonely hamlets!
And the canyon-like cities as well!
The shining expanses of heaven,
The burden of backbreaking toil.

I meet you halfway on the threshold –
With your tresses like serpents uncoiled,
With the unfathomed name of a godhead
On lips so compressed and so cold ..

But before that encounter in battle,
I shall never abandon my shield..
You will never uncover your shoulders...
Yet above soars a dream – drunken, wild!

I look, and I measure the rancour,
Hating, promising, loving you too.
For the pain, the disaster – I know it –
Do not matter: my welcome to you!

24 October 1907

7

All down the streets the blizzard sweeps,
Pulsating, whirling, swirling.
Somebody offers me a hand,
Somebody's gently smiling.

And leads me on – I see the deep
Between dark granite banks compressed.
It flows along, it sings away,
It calls and calls again – accursed!

I step towards it, then recoil,
I stand stock still in sudden fear:

I only need once cross the line
To join the murmuring stream down there.

He whispers – won't be driven away
(And will's extinguished utterly):
"Please understand, the soul's ennobled
Simply by knowing how to die.

"Please understand, you're all alone,
Sweet are the mysteries of the cold...
Look, look into the chilly stream,
Where nothing ever can grow old..."

I run. Let go, be damned to you!
Don't try to put me to the test'
I'll seek the fields, the snow, the night,
Under a willow tree I'll rest.

There, freedom freer than all freedoms
Puts no constraint on him who's free,
And pain, of all known pain most painful,
Brings back the one who's lost his way!

26 October 1907

9

Accordion, accordion!
Hey, wheeze and drone and sing!
Hey, little yellow buttercups,
You flowers of the spring!

With merry trills and merry whistles
They dance till break of day.
The bushes nod their heads at me
And whisper: "Look that way!"

I look – she flings her arms out wide
And sails into the dance.
She scatters everyone with flowers
And sings as in a trance...

You faithless one, you cunning one,
You sly one, dance away.
Poison this misspent soul of mine
Forever and a day.

I'll lose my mind, I'll lose my mind,
My love is mindlessness,
For you are night, and you are blind,
And you are drunkenness...

You've numbed me to the soul within,
You've brought me near to death,
Because of you, of you I sing,
As long as I have breath!..

9 November 1907

10

Keep working, and working, and working:
Good health and good looks you must spoil
In honest and backbreaking labour
In honest and backbreaking toil

Come festivals, others enjoy them,
Your songs are on other folks' lips,
And with others, the soldier's grass widow
Joins in, with her hands on her hips.

You know that you too could be dancing–
No worse than the others, all told;
That you could draw round you still tighter
Your sash, all embroidered with gold!

That you are the tallest, most handsome,
Most striking, compared with the rest,
And of the young wives in the chorus,
That one over there is the best!

There's fire in her blood and there's vigour,
Though pale are her swarthy young cheeks;

Her eyebrows are black, finely arching,
There's bliss in the stern way she speaks...

It's sweet, yes, it's sweet beyond
measure
To work till the new day's beginning,
And know that the merry grass widow
Has left for the dancing and singing.

26 October 1907

11

Again I'm silent at the feet
Of one I've long held very dear.
The storm wind drives on to
the threshold
The white-winged blizzard's snowy fire.

Merely to murmur your sweet name
Such wonder, pain and sweetness brings...
Or to kiss covertly your mantle
While still the snowstorm sings and
sings...

There, in your evil, drunken prison,
My heart, you spent the long, long night,
And snowy blossoms, lightly falling
On to your eyelids, closed them tight

As if, in mid-flight through the
blizzard,
I'd weakened and could run no more,
Before me in the snowy darkness
There rose a cold and lifeless flower

With secret sadness, tender sadness,
As snow down from a petal slips,
That living name of yours, Snow Maiden,
Still falls unceasing from my lips.

8 November 1907

FAINA'S SONG

Each time into your eyes I gaze
With my own snake-like narrow eyes
And touch you tenderly,

Beware! I'm serpent through and through!
I only once belonged to you,
I left you high and dry!

You leave me cold! Out of my sight!
I'll be with someone else tonight!
You have a wife to cling to!

Go, she can banish your distress,
So let her kiss, let her caress,
Go, or my whip shall sting you!

Enter my garden if you dare,
Defy my black and slit-eyed stare,
I'll burn you up alive!

I am all spring! I am all flame'
Don't you come to me, just the same–
I wait for those I love!

Whoever's young, whoever's old,
Whoever gives most ringing gold,
Come at my ringing call!

But as for beauty, or grey hairs,
Or for that foolish head of yours–
Whistle, thin lash, and fall!

December 1907

* * *

She waited all her life. Grew weary
Of waiting. Smiled. Then bowed her head.

On to the dark and slender shoulders
A lock of hair at random strayed.

The world is neither great nor wealthy–
Not to be watched with sombre eye!
They're only people, who advise you
To wait and show humility...

But here some kind of pipe is playing,
Heartrending, thin, pathetic, wild.
"Rock someone else's infant cradle,
Caress the poor unwanted child..."

I'm here, too. Angry and degraded,
Over the lyre that my poleaxe is,
I bargain with my destiny
Around the wide world's market places.

I've faith in your hair's misty darkness,
I've faith in your magnificence.
My lonely soul, your loyal watchdog,
Lies at your feet, rattling its chain

And so once more, and so once more,
Meeting that look of yours, dark-eyed,
I want to call you by your name,
To live and breathe close by your side...

A dream! What is the dream of life?
A poison much like any other...
Without perfidiousness or cunning,
I shall betray you like that other..

It's fun to live. It's fun to acknowledge
That nothing's new upon this earth,
And that to words full of life's fury
Even a dead man can give birth!

And no one's bothered in the slightest
That I'll give people what you gave
To me, and surely one day people
Shall chisel "Poet" above my grave.

13 January 1908

When you stand before me,
So full of life, so lovely,
And so distressed,
Speaking only of sorrowful things,
Contemplating death,
In love with no one,
Despising your own beauty –
What else? D'you think I want to hurt you?

Never! After all, I'm not violent,
Nor yet a deceiver, nor even a proud man.
Although I know a great deal,
Have had too many thoughts since I was a child,
And wrap myself too much in my own feelings.
You see, I'm a poet –
A man who calls everything by its name,
Who steals the fragrance from the living flower.

However much you speak of sorrowful things,
However much you consider ends and beginnings,
I nevertheless venture to point out
That after all you are only fifteen.
That is why I would have you
Fall in love with an ordinary, simple man
To whom the earth and the sky mean something more
Than sentiments, in rhyming and blank verse,
Addressed to the earth and the sky.
Then I shall be happy for your sake,
Since only someone in love
Has the right to be called a human being.

6 February 1908

* * *

She came in out of the frost,
Her cheeks rosy,

And filled my flat
With a fragrance of fresh air and perfume,
With the ringing tones of her voice,
And with a lot of small talk, hardly conducive
to serious
Work.

She promptly dropped on the floor
An exceedingly bulky magazine of the Arts,
At which my spacious apartments
Suddenly seemed
Overcrowded.

All this was rather annoying,
Not to say embarrassing.
However, she asked me to read
Macbeth aloud.
Hardly had I come to "*The earth hath bubbles*",
Of which I cannot speak without agitation,
When I saw that she too was agitated,
And was staring fixedly out of the window.

An enormous tabby cat,
Flattened precariously along the edge of the roof,
Was stalking a pair of doves at their
Billing and cooing.
What annoyed me more than anything else
Was that the birds, not we, were making love,
And that the times of Paolo and Francesca are gone
forever.

6 February 1908

* * *

That long, drawn anguish I remember;
The night was burning low outside;
And, as she wrung her hands, they glimmered
Faintly in dawn's uncertain light.

A whole life lived, and lived for nothing,
Tortured us, humbled, burned like fire,
And day picked out the church domes growing,
Phantom-like, higher and still higher.

Beneath the window, still more hurried
The sound of passing feet became,
And, in grey puddles, circles widened
Under the heavy drops of rain.

And on and on it dragged, all morning,
That idle argument of ours,
And nothing, nothing was decided
By a spring shower of stormy tears.

4 March 1908
Moscow

* * *

With bitter and unceasing tears
The skies of spring wept over us.
Beyond the reeds, a faint light twinkled,
Teasing the lively, mettlesome horse.

Once more you said I was inhuman,
You, become mine so long ago!..
But in the boisterous and oncoming
Wind, see—your face is all aglow.

Once more you shrank back from the fire
So vainly and so helplessly...
But even heaven was full of passion,
And heaven it was that favoured me!..

It little matters now whose shoulders
I fondle, or whose lips I kiss...
Down what deserted streets and alleys
I make the intrepid driver race...

No matter now whose sigh, whose whisper –
Perhaps it is not you that's here...
Only the clear, uneven hoofbeats,
As if from somewhere high up there...

So, driven crazy by the moment,
Again and yet again we gave
Ourselves, proud of annihilation,
To your vicissitudes, O love!

Now that the stars are nearer to me
Than that night of unbridled passion,
When you fell infinitely lower,
Daughter of utter degradation,

When, with nobody left beside me,
I curse and bitterly upbraid
Each day, I now see pass before me
The image of your *uncrowned shade.*

With blessings? Or with sad reproaches?
Or hatred? Vengeance? Grief? Or do
You wish to be my sentence for me? –
I don't know. I've forgotten you.

20 November 1908

From FREE THOUGHTS (1907)

To G Chulkov

•

ON DEATH

More and more frequently I roam the city.
More and more frequently I look on death
And smile a rational smile. But then why not?
That's how I want it. I see no harm in knowing
That death will come to me, too, in its time.

As I walked down the highroad past the race-course,
A golden day dreamed on the piles of gravel;

Behind the close pales of the fence, the race-track
Lay green under the sun. Green stalks of corn
And dandelions, all puffed up by the spring,
Dozed in the gentle sunshine. In the distance,
The grandstand's flat roof seemed to press down on
The fashionable crowd. The fluttering pennants
Made patches of bright colour. Passers-by
Were sitting perched atop the fence and watching.

As I walked on, I heard the next race coming
Over the track. There was the rapid drumming
Of horses' hooves. And then a sudden cry:
"He's down! He's down!" They shouted on the fen
I quickly climbed on to a nearby tree-stump
And saw it all: already in the distance,
The jockeys in their colours were approaching
The post, while in the rear a lone horse
cantered,
Riderless, with the empty stirrups tossing.
Behind the soft green of some curly birch-trees,
Quite close to me, I saw the jockey lying,
Dressed all in yellow, in the green spring corn;
Supine, and looking up, as if he were
Staring into the blue depths of the sky.
He might have been there ages, arms flung out,
One leg drawn up. Almost as if posing.
People were running to him. In the distance,
Its wheel-spokes turning slowly round, a landau
Was on the way. Some people stopped and picked
The jockey up...

One yellow leg hung helpless
In the tight riding breeches. The head lolled
At an unnatural angle on their shoulders.
The landau drove up. The chicken-yellow
Bundle was laid upon the waiting cushions
With great care and solicitude. A man
Jumped awkwardly on to the foot-rest, then
Stood still, holding the victim's head and leg.
The impressive-looking coachman turned back,
And slowly, as before, the spokes revolved,
The coach-box, axles and the splash-boards
glittered...

To die that way is beautiful and free
He'd ridden all his life with one fixed goal:
To get there first. But this time, at the gallop,
His panting horse had somehow lost its footing;
He failed to hold the saddle with his legs,
Then the frail stirrups shot into the air
And he was pitched straight forward by momentum
To somersault and land head-first upon
His own springtime and hospitable earth.
Then, in a flash, all his most vital thoughts
Ran through his mind. Ran through his mind and
quickly
Died. And the eyes died too.
And dreamily a corpse stared at the sky.

So beautiful it was, so free.

Once, I was wandering along the embankment.
Dockers with barrows were unloading firewood,
Bricks and coal from barges. And the river
Looked even darker against the white foam.
The brown of sun-tanned bodies could be seen
In shirt collars open at the neck;
The bright eyes of old, untrammelled Russia
Shone fiercely in the dirty, blackened faces.
And at that very spot, the bare-legged children
Were trudging through the heaps of yellow sand,
Taking away a brick, or log of wood,
Or beam. And then hiding. And soon after
Their grimy heels would twinkle as they
scarpered.
And mothers there with scrawny, pendulous breasts
Under their grimy dresses, waited, cursing,
And boxed their ears; and then they sorted over
The firewood, bricks and beams. And carried them
off,
Almost bent double underneath the burden.
Again, returning with a cheerful racket,
The little urchins went on with their
thieving:
This one a beam of wood, that one a brick...

There was a sudden splash and then a shout:
"Man overboard!" More shouting from
the barge.
A docker, setting down his wheelbarrow,
Pointed his hand at something in the water.
A throng of coloured shirts rushed up to where
Upon the grass, among the cobblestones,
Right on the bank a vodka bottle lay.
Somebody fetched a boat-hook.

Among the piles
Driven into the water near the embankment,
A man was rocking lightly on the swell
In shirt and pair of badly torn trousers.
One man got hold on him. Another helped.
And finally the long and outstretched body,
From which the water streamed in rivulets,
Was pulled ashore and laid upon the ground.
A policeman, sabre rattling on the stones,
Applied one ear straight to the sodden chest
And for a long time listened carefully.
And every new-arrival kept on asking
The same invariable and foolish questions:
Where had he fallen? Had he been in the water
A long time? How much vodka had he drunk?
Then all began to go away quietly,
And I, too, started on my way and heard
One very passionate, but drunken worker
Telling the others with authority
That drink kills people every single day.

I'll wander round some more. While it's still
sunny,
While it's still hot, and while my head is still
Dull and my thoughts are listless...

O, my heart!
Act as my guide through life. And look on death
Smiling. You will yourself grow tired and weary.
You will not long withstand the kind of life
That I am living nowadays. The love



And hatred that I feel are far too much
For anyone to bear for long.

I want
Always to look into the eyes of people
And drink my fill of wine, and kiss the girls,
And fill the evening with insane desires;
When the heat stops me dreaming in the daytime,
Sing songs! And hear the wind blow through
the world

June-July 1907

ON THE NORTH SEA

Whatever have they turned the seaside into,
Those flappers and their beaux on holiday?
They lay the tables, smoke and feed their faces,
Drink lemonade. Then wander down the beach,
Laughing their hollow laughter and polluting
The seaside air with tittle-tattle. Then
Drovers transport these types in bathing cabins,
Discreetly covered with a roof of sailcloth,
Out to the shallows. When they arrive, they
change
Out of their frivolous frocks and uniforms
Into light, comfortable swimming costumes,
And, baring flabby muscles and flabby chests,
They get into the water, squealing; test
The seabed with uncertain feet, and shout,
Trying to show they're having lots of fun.

But yonder, the sunset's turned the whole sky
Into a deep and many-coloured goblet.
One glow of light has reached out to the other;
The sisters of two separate heavens are weaving
A single mist, now rose-red, now pale-blue.
Meanwhile, a cloud that's sinking out at sea
Lances in dying frenzy from its eyes
Bright beams of light, now crimson, now dark-blue.

Then from the long, grey, slowly rotting mole
That stretches out into the open sea,
We read all the graffiti: "Ever yours",
"Kolya was here with Katya"; "Diodorus
Hieromonakh and Brother Isidor
Were here. The works of God are truly wondrous
We read all this and then go out to sea
Aboard a quaint, pot-bellied motor-boat

The petrol reeks and splutters. Two white wings
Pursue us in the water. The swift wake curves.
And, sweeping past the bored ones on the beach
The fishing boats, the narrow cape, the beacon,
We race out over multicoloured ripples
Into the open and caressing bay.

On the horizon, far behind us, hangs
The silent glow of a great conflagration.
The fishermen's Volny Island is extended
Over the water like the long, flat back
Of some sea monster. Far ahead, we see
The lights of many vessels and the probing
Beam of the searchlight on the Customs launch
But we are heading for the pale blue mist.
The buoys lurch at an angle on the water,
Marking the navigation channel's limits,
And far away, from one buoy to another,
The sails of fishing schooners come and go

The sea is dead calm. Under full sail,
A beautiful sea-going yacht lies silent.
Upon the slender mast, a tiny lantern,
Just like a gemstone on a diadem,
Glows softly on the dusky brow of heaven.

And in the bows, not saying anything
'Mid the fantastic tangle of the rigging,
There sit, arms folded, people wearing bright
Panama hats low over stern, dark faces.
Amidships, by the mast, also not speaking,
There stands a sailor's sombre figure, watching.
Politely, we keep well clear of the yacht

And one of us aboard the motorboat
Asks courteously and quietly: "Want a tow?"
A stern voice answers with a kind of
solemn
Simplicity: "No, thank you very much."

And, steering round the yacht once more, we gaze.
Our hearts all filled with reverence and awe,
solemn
After the slowly dwindling silhouette
Of that becalmed sea beauty under sail,
And at the jewel of the diadem
Glowing up there upon the dusky brow.

Seaside Resort of Sestroretsk
June-July 1907

ON THE DUNES

I very much dislike the empty language
Of love, with all those tired, pathetic clichés:
"You're mine", "I'm yours", "I love you", "Ever
yours"
I dislike slavery. With gaze untrammelled,
I look into a lovely woman's eyes
And say to her: "Tonight. As for tomorrow–
Tomorrow is a bright new day. So come.
Possess me, triumphant passion. But tomorrow
I'll simply go away and then I'll sing."

My soul is simple. It was nurtured by
The salt wind of the seas and by the resinous
Scent of spring. It bears the same marks
That can be seen on my wind-beaten face.
And I am handsome with the beggarly beauty
Of shifting sand-dunes and the northern seas.

So thought I, wandering along the Finnish border
Trying to understand the alien language
Of the unshaven, green-eyed Finns about me.
Otherwise, all was quiet. Beside the platform,
The train stood ready for us, raising steam.
The officials of the Russian customs service

Were resting at their ease upon the sandy
Cliff near which the railway terminated.
Another land lay open to the view,
And a ramshackle Russian church looked out
Across a strange and unfamiliar country.

These thoughts were in my mind. And then she came
And stood there on the slope. Her eyes were red
From the hot sun and from the windblown sand.
Her hair, as resinous as were the pine-trees,
Fell to her shoulders with a dark blue sheen.
She came. Her stare, that of an animal,
Met my own animal stare. And then she gave
A high-pitched laugh, bent down, and threw at me
A lump of turf and stinging golden handful
Of sand. She then jumped to her feet again
And bounded swiftly down the steep embankment.

I chased her for a long, long time. I scratched
My face on pine needles, bloodied my hands
And tore my clothes. I shouted and pursued her
As if she were my quarry: shouted and called:
My passionate voice rang like a hunting horn.
Fleeing, she left a faint trail of small footprints
Across the dunes and ran into the pine-trees
When the blue dusk had woven them together.

And now I lie, breathless after the chase,
Upon the sand. And in my blazing eyes
She's still running, and all of her is laughing;
Her hair is laughing, her limbs are laughing too,
Her dress is laughing, billowing as she runs...
I lie here, thinking to myself: "Tonight,
And then tomorrow night. I shall not leave,
Until I finally have her at bay,
And with a voice clear as a hunting horn
I bar her way. And then I'll cry to her:
"You're mine! You're mine!" And she will cry to me
"I'm yours! I'm yours!"

The Dunes
June-July 1907

BOOK THREE (1907-1916)

From THIS TERRIBLE WORLD (1909-1916)

TO THE MUSE

There are tidings of doom and disaster
In your secret melodiousness,
The damnation of all that's held sacred,
The defilement of all happiness.

There's a force of attraction so powerful
That, along with the rest, I would even

Aver that the lure of your beauty
Has brought angels to earth down from heaven...

When you sully belief with your laughter,
Then above you there shines suddenly
The subdued purple grey of the halo
That I once had the fortune to see.

Are you good? Are you evil? There's nothing
Of this planet about you at all.
Some say you're the Muse and a wonder,
But to me you're the torments of hell.

I cannot tell why in the sunrise
At the hour when my strength was so low,
I recovered, and noticed your face there,
And asked for sweet solace of you.

I was eager for hatred between us,
So why all these rich presents of yours,
Flowering meadows, the glittering heavens–
All your beauty's implacable curse?

More perfidious were your caresses
Than the Northern Lights, quick on the wane,
More short-lived than the love of a gypsy,
And more heady than golden champagne.

There was always a dread consolation
In trampling on shrine after shrine,
And there's no sweeter joy to the heart than
This harsh, bitter passion of mine.

29 December 1912

* * *

I leave the tiresome noise and clamour,
The bustling, teeming city crowd,
And wander off, soul idle, into
The snows, the darkness and the void.

The thread of consciousness I've severed,
Forgetting what, forgetting how...
Ahead of me are lights and darkness.
Around me, houses, trams and snow.

Supposing, under strange bewitchment,
I cut the thread of consciousness,
And come back home again, degraded,
Will you forgive me nonetheless?

Knowing full well what guiding beacon
Leads me to my long-distance goal,
Will you forgive me for my snowstorms,
My fever, poetry, gloom and all?

Or rather will you not forgive me,
But ring my bells to sound the alarm,
That loss of bearings in the darkness
Won't make me stray away from home?

2 February 1909

* * *

From a mist all crystal-shining
From a dream undreamt of mine,
Someone's image past divining...
(Tête-à-tête, privately dining
In a restaurant, with wine.)

Gypsy music's wailing burden
Wafted in from distant halls,
Far-off fiddles' misty whining...
Enter wind and enter maiden,
Patterned mirrors on the walls.

Eyes that meet – and dark-blue glowing
Depths receding in that gaze.
Magdalene! O Magdalene!
Winds from empty deserts blowing
Fan the fury of the blaze.

Slender wine-glass in your hand;
Snow beats on the window-panes –
Only half of life is seen!
Past the snowstorm, there's a land
Scorched by blazing southern suns!

Resolution of all torments
All abuses and all praises,
All the smiles, like serpents coiling,
All the supplicating movements –
Smash life, like this glass, to pieces!

That this passion's power should languish,
In the bed of long, long night!
That, in fiddles' barren wailing,
Fatal twilight should extinguish
Eyes dilated, huge with fright.

6 October 1909

* * *

Late in autumn from the harbour,
From the land that's under snow,
On their predetermined voyages
See the great big steamers go.

By the docks a derrick towers,
Blurred against the night-time skies.
On the snowy shore, a single
Solitary lantern sways.

Through the snowstorm reels a sailor –
Ship won't take him – left ashore.
"All I had, I've gone and drunk it,
Just can't take life any more..."

And the empty shore is covered
By the snow's first gentle fall...

Sailor, is it sweet, the cleanest,
Softest winding sheet of all?

14 November 1909

ON THE ISLANDS

Stone columns, whitened by the blizzards,
Elagin Bridge, two lights once more,
A woman's amorous voice, sand crunching,
A horse's whinny—all as before.

Two shadows, merged in one while kissing,
Glide with the runners of the sleigh,
But, neither furtive nor yet jealous,
I have this new one in my sway.

Yes, it's a melancholy pleasure
That love, like snow, must surely pass.
Oh, must we, must we always promise
The old, eternal faithfulness?

No, she is not the first I fondle,
And I, punctilious and severe,
Will make no semblance of submission
Nor ask for royal domains of her.

No, I count up each time, with careful
Geometer's consistency,
Bridges and chapel, biting wind,
Those barren islands that I see.

This is a ritual: simply straighten
The shaggy bearskin as you go,
Embrace the slender waist, be witty,
Speed through the darkness and the snow,

Remember button-boots so slender,
And fall in love with ice-cold fur...
No lover's rapier shall transfix me
At some grim duel because of her...

No mother with a lighted candle
Waits in the doorway anxiously...
No wretched spouse behind closed shutters
Begins to burn with jealousy...

What made last night so full of radiance,
What gives tonight all its allure,
Is but the ball's continuation,
The move from light to dark – no more...

22 November 1909

IN THE RESTAURANT

I shall never forget it (there was or was not
Such an evening): the sunset's declining
And dwindling fires had consumed and divided
the sky;
In the yellow light, street-lamps were shining.

I was there, in a window seat. The place
was crowded,
And the fiddles sang amorously,
And I sent you a single black rose in a glass
Of champagne as gold as the sky.

You glanced over my way. Embarrassed, but boldly,
I met your cold stare, and I bowed.
And you said to your escort, "That man's in love,
too,"
In a tone that was cuttingly loud.

Straightaway, as in answer, the strings began
playing,
All the fiddles struck up in the band...
But a young girl's contempt was the answer you
gave me,
A scarce visible move of the hand.

Of a sudden you left, like a startled bird,
You passed me, as light as my dream...

Just a trace of perfume, and your eyelashes fluttered,
And your silks whispered soft in alarm.

But still you watch from the depths of the mirrors,
And, while watching, you called, "Catch your prize!"
And her necklace jingled as the gypsy girl, dancing,
Wailed of love to the sunset skies.

19 April 1910

* * *

That man there is burnt out

Fet

It's hard to brave the world from day to day,
Pretending that you're still not dead,
Telling of passions and their tragic play
To those who are not living yet;

And, staring your nightly terror in the face,
Find order in the chaos of the emotions,
That, from the feeble glow of art's reflections,
The world might know life's all-consuming blaze!

10 May 1910

DEGRADATION

Black the branches of trees all naked,
Yellow the winter sunset sky.
(Those condemned are led to the scaffold
Even in such a sunset to die.)

Shabby sofas upholstered in scarlet,
Dusty tassels of doorway hangings...
Tradesman, gambler, officer, student
In this room, with the glasses jingling...

Hardly human, the hand that glided
Over the nudes in this magazine.
And the hand of a wanton *scoundrel*
Pressed that bell-push, covered with grime.

Hark! Across the thick pile of the carpets,
Jingling spurs, laughter muffled by doors...
Can this house be truly a dwelling?
Is *this* inhuman destiny ours?

Am I glad at today's encounter?
That your face is so ghastly white?
That the cold and enormous sunset
Sears your naked shoulders with light?

On that golden icon of yours,
Blood-encrusted, the lips so fine
(Did we really call *that thing* love?)
Writhe askew in a senseless line.

In the enormous yellow sunset
See the bed (in such luxury!) drown...
Still we're breathless from our
embraces,
Yet you whistle, again and again...

Cheerless whistle, graveyard whistle...
Hark! Spurs jingle behind the door...
Snake-like, heavy, and gorged,
and dusty,
Slides your train from chair to floor!

Yes, you're hard! Be even more daring!
Not your husband or bridegroom am I!
Drive your French stiletto heel through my
Heart, O angel of yesterday!

6 December 1911

The aerial sprite has found its freedom.
Rocking its two wings up and down,
It glides into the clear air currents
As a sea snake into the brine.

The airscrews hum like strings vibrating...
And look, the pilot, sitting tight,
To the blind sun above the grandstand
Directs his spiral upward flight.

Even at that high altitude,
The engine's copper parts are gleaming...
And though it's hard to see or hear them,
Still the propeller blades are singing...

And now in vain you search above you;
There's not a speck left in the sky:
In the upheld binoculars,
Air clear as water meets the eye...

But down here in the shimmering heatwave,
Amid the haze that's all around,
Hangars and people, all things earthly,
Seem almost pinned down to the ground.

A strange, aetherial chord of music
Sounds in the golden mist once more...
The applause, ovations and pathetic
World record seem so very near!

The aircraft corkscrews lower, lower...
The wings twist madly round and round.
Suddenly, there's a strange and ugly
Break in the engines' droning sound.

The beast, propellers silenced, hovers
At a strange angle in the air.
It seems to look round, as if seeking
Support... But can find nothing there!

Too late: upon the grassy plain,
A wing, all crumpled, toppling over...
Caught in the aircraft's tangled cables,
An arm more dead than any lever...

Why, for the first and last time only,
Did you so bravely take the skies?
To make that venal old Bitch Goddess
Lift up the violets of her eyes?

Or was the sudden, fatal foretaste
Of self-oblivion's joy enough,
So that, to know the thrill of falling,
You simply switched the engines off?

Or did some frightful vision of future
Wars cloud your reason: in the night,
A flier through foul weather bringing
Earth a grim load of dynamite?

1910-January 1912

DANCES OF DEATH

1

It's hard for someone dead among the living
To seem alive and passionate everywhere,
But one must worm one's way into society
And hide the rattle of bones for one's career...

The living sleep. The dead man leaves his coffin.
Off to the senate, courthouse, bank goes he...
However white the night, his rage is blacker,
And so the pen-nibs squeak triumphantly.

The corpse toils over a report all day.
His working hours are over now. But look–
In a sly whisper, with his bottom wagging,
He tells the senator a dirty joke.

Evening comes round. The drizzling rain has turned

Houses and people into a muddy mess.
But now the corpse rides in a grinding taxi
To yet another kind of ghastliness.

Dressed in an evening coat, the dead man goes
Into the crowded hall, and hurries over
To be benevolently smiled on by
The host, a fool, and by his wife, another.

The day's official business has unnerved him,
But music drowns the rattling of dry bones.
He firmly shakes the hands of various people:
Just seem alive and keep up the pretence!

Then, near a column, he observes a woman,
A friend of his; like him, she's quite, quite dead.
Behind the spoken social commonplaces
One hears what's actually being said.

"My weary friend, I feel so strange in here."
"My weary friend, it's cold in my grave too."
"It's midnight." "But you haven't asked NN
To join you in a waltz. She loves you so..."

NN is looking round for him, bright-eyed,
With an excitement not to be contained,
And on her face, with all its girlish beauty,
There is the mindless bliss of love unfeigned.

He whispers foolish nothings in her ear,
Words that to living people mean delight,
Watches the rosy blush suffuse her shoulders,
Her stance, with head held slightly on one side...

With savage, nether-worldly venom, he
Spices the common social tittle-tattle.
"He is so clever! So much in love with me!"

Her ears are buzzing strangely, eerily:
It is the bones that rattle...

19 February 1912

2

Night, a street-lamp, a pharmacy.
A meaningless and murky light.
A quarter of a century
Can pass – no change. No hope of flight.

Die, and go back to the beginning,
Just as before, fate will repeat
Night, the canal's cold waters rippling,
The pharmacy, the lamp, the street.

10 October 1913

3

An empty street. One window is lit up.
The Jewish chemist murmurs in his sleep.

Before a cupboard that's been marked *Venena,*
Down on its creaking, bended knees, unseen

A skeleton, all wrapped round in a cape,
Searches for something, grinning jaws agape...

Finds it... But makes a noise by accident,
And turns its skull. The chemist gives a grunt.

And shifts on to his other side... Meanwhile
The intruder quietly slips the precious phial

To two strange women, each without a nose,
Outside the shop, where pale the street-lamp
glows.

October 1912

4

Old, old dream. Out of dark pall,
Street-lamps are proceeding whither?

Nothing there but inky water
And oblivion forever.

Now a ghost glides into sight,
Soon another's by its side.
Cape unfastened, shirt-front white,
Evening dress, red buttonhole.

Say, who would the second be?
Knight-at-arms? Bride newly wed?
Faceless. Plumes. Helm on its head.
Utter stillness of the dead.

Now a bell rings at the gate.
Tumblers in the door-lock grate.
In they walk – no need to wait –
Prostitute and debauchee.

Icy is the wind and strident.
Dark, quiet, empty everywhere.
Now a window shines upstairs.
No one cares...

Dull as lead, the rippling water
Brings oblivion forever.
Now there is a third ghost. Whither,
In among the shadows gliding?

7 February 1914

5

Vile and glad again the rich man,
Crushed the needy one.
From above the massive stone
Piles, a pale moon's watching.

Sending down a silence deep,
Picking out the plunging, steep
Sides of sheer stone canyons,
Black of sheds and awnings...

All of this would be in vain
If there were no tsar to reign,
    Order to uphold.

But don't seek a palace fair
With a kindly person there
    And a crown of gold.

In the light of street-lamps rare,
He is going to appear
    From the wilderness.

Kerchief wound around his neck,
Cap with holes worn in the peak,
    Smile upon his face.

7 February 1914

* * *

Worlds fly. Years fly. And all the time, the empty
Universe stares with sombre eyes at us.
But you, my soul, although benumbed and weary,
Time and again insist on happiness.

What's happiness? The coolness of an evening
In twilit gardens, or the forest's gloom?
Or is it the grim, morbid consolations
Of wine, and passion, and impending doom?

What's happiness? A brief and crowded moment,
Oblivion, sleep, and rest from worldly cares...
Again you wake up to the unknown, crazy
Impulse that grips the heart all unawares...

You sigh, you look—you see the danger's over...
But swift upon its heels another comes!
Whipped up and left to roam around at random,
The spinning-top glides off, and whirls, and hums!

And, clutching the sharp edge that's slipping from
you,
And listening to the ever-booming chimes,
How can we still keep sane in all that changing
Medley of thought-out reasons, spaces, times?..

When will it end? One cannot without respite
Listen so long to that persistent roar..,
It's all so terrible! So strange! Your hand,
Comrade, we'll seek oblivion once more.

2 July 1912

* * *

sorrow for the lost Lenore
Edgar Allen Poe

An autumn evening. I was trying to solve that
old
Distressing problem to a rainshower's glassy
sound,
When straight into my study, misty and enormous,
There walked that gentleman. With him, a shaggy
hound.

He sat down wearily in the armchair by the fire.
The dog stretched out upon the hearthrug at his
feet.
And then he said politely: "Haven't you had
enough?
Sir, it is time to accept the Genius of Fate."

"But in old age one's youth returns, and likewise
passion..."
So I began... He firmly interrupted me:
"She's what she always was: *mad Edgar Poe's*
Lenore.
You can't go back. Say more? No, no, I've had my
say."

Strange, but life had been storm, and ecstasy and hell,
But now, this evening, with a total stranger there,
Under that unassuming, imperturbable gaze,
Life seemed to have become much simpler than before

My guest departed. Still, his dog is always by me.
When I'm distressed, he looks at me with friendly eyes,
And firmly plants his rigid, heavy paw upon my knee,
As if to say: "*It's time, Sir, to be reconciled.*"

2 November 1912

* * *

There's a game: you walk in, being careful
That you don't alert anyone there,
Then you seek out your victim and watch him
With a steady, invisible stare.

And no matter how coarse or thick-headed
Is the person you're covertly watching,
He'll have sensed that he's under surveillance,
Though it's only his lips that are twitching.

Another reacts very quickly:
Stiffened shoulders betray that he knows;
He turns round, and there's nothing behind him,
But his nervousness rapidly grows.

The invisible stare's terrifying,
But the victim can't run it to ground;
He's aware of it, never quite knowing
Whose the eyes are that follow him round.

Not for gain, or for love, or for vengeance;
Just a game fit for children, that's all;
But wherever some people are gathered,
Those *detectives* are there on the prowl.

Even you sometimes can't fully fathom
Why it happens from time to time
That you go as yourself to see people,
When you leave, you're no longer the same.

There's the good eye and there is the evil–
But it's best if no eye looks our way,
For in each of us there are too many
Inexplicable forces at play...

Though a thousand years pass, it's our sorrow
That we still won't have measured the soul:
We shall hear the swift flight of the planets
In the silence like thunderclaps roll.

In the meantime, we live all unknowing,
And to grasp our own powers is above us,
And, like children who meddle with fire,
We keep burning ourselves–and others.

18 December 1913

THE WAY MY FRIEND LIVES

5

A fool of a beggar won't leave me,
He seems to think I'm his friend.
"Your money?" "I've been to the tavern."
"Your heart?" "Threw it into the pond."

"What is it you want, then?" "To see you
More honest, more open, like me.
Like me, in adversity humble,
And that's all I want you to be."

"Why can't you just mind your own business?
Clear off, keep your distance, confound you!"
"You think there are two of us here, then?
You're wrong. Take a good look around you."

It's true (yes, he's set me a poser!)
I look—no one there; take a peep,
And find that my pocket is empty...
Look into my heart—and I weep.

30 December 1913

THE DEMON

Come, come with me, and be my humble
And loyal slave. Then I shall fly
Fearless with you up to those mountain
Summits all glittering in the sky.

I'll bear you safe over the chasm,
Teasing you that it's bottomless;
I'll only find more inspiration
In your stark terror's groundlessness.

And from the raindust in the aether,
And from the sudden dizzy spell,
With body's might and pinions' shadow
I'll keep you safe, nor let you fall.

Amid the crags, in glittering whiteness
Upon a meadow free from stain,
I shall consume you with this body
Divinely beautiful of mine.

Do you not know how mean and petty
It is, that human self-deception,
That sad, terrestrial self-pity
That you would call unbridled passion?

But, as the hush of evening deepens,
And, spellbound by me, you desire
To fly through heaven's fiercely blazing
Wilderness higher and yet higher—

Yes, I shall surely take you with me
And bear you up aloft to where

A star can seem like our own planet,
And Earth itself seem like a star.

And, speechless in your very wonder,
You shall see new worlds far away,
And wondrous visions past believing,
The figments of my mind at play.

Trembling with helplessness and terror,
You'll whisper softly, "Set me free!"
Then, slowly opening my pinions,
I'll smile at you: "Fly, fly away!"

And I shall watch, divinely smiling,
As in full flight you are destroyed,
And like a quivering stone go sailing
Away into the shining void.

9 June 1910

From RETRIBUTION (1908-1913)

* * *

Prowess, heroic deeds and deathless fame
I could forget in this world's misery,
While still your image in its simple frame
Glowed on the table-top in front of me.

But the hour came, you left, and it was over.
I flung the cherished ring into the night.

Your destiny you yielded to another,
And I forgot your beauty's radiant light.

So in a whirling swarm the days flew by...
My life on wine and passion ran to waste...
But I remembered you in church one day,
And called for you, as for the youth I'd lost...

I called you, but you never once looked back.
I even wept, but you would not relent.
Sad and forlorn, you donned your long blue cloak,
And out into the rainy night you went.

My dearest, tenderest one, I do not know
What sanctuary shields your boundless pride.
My sleep is sound: I dream of the blue cloak
In which you walked into the night outside.

No more the dreams of love and deathless fame:
They are all flown, and youth has had its day!
And so your image in its simple frame
With my own hand I took and hid away.

30 December 1908

WHO HAVE FORGOTTEN THEE

And then the hour struck. Time furled up its cloak.
I saw the sword flash and the walls divide.
And then towards the misty, evil summits
I moved off with the crowd.

Beyond the towering heights, more heights
unrolled,
The people murmured, the leaders
were disheartened,
The thunderclouds came rolling up to meet us,
The lightning flashes darted.

Our arms hung loosely at our sides like lashes,
When fists were clenched around us everywhere,



07

Threatening the thunder; the children sobbed,
the wome
Bound kerchiefs round their hair.

And I, my strength gone, left the ranks, fell
back.
Others came up to join me in a crowd.
There were no more blue skies for us, the sun
Entered a thundercloud.

And so we wandered, murmuring helplessly.
Where our old dwellings were we could not say;
Gathered around the fires at night, we shivered,
Hoping to find the way.

Vain was our passion! Vain our wanderings!
We dreamed of what we knew could never be.
Such joyless dreaming is ordained for those
Who have forgotten Thee.

1 August 1908

* * *

She only wanted, as before,
To succour me, to breathe her own
Warm breath into my tortured body,
Into my cold and cheerless home.

She rose above me like the heavens,
And yet I could not even stir
My ailing hand in her direction,
Or say that I was missing her.

I watched her with lacklustre eyes
As she stood grieving over me,
Between us there were words no more,
No bitterness, nor ecstasy...

The earthly heart's been growing weary
For many years, for many days...

It came late on its madly racing
Troika, our earthly happiness.

I'm stricken with a mortal illness,
I live and yearn for what's elsewhere,
I am content to watch the sunset,
Eternal night I do not fear.

Eternity has looked upon me,
And brought me peace of mind again,
Has quenched the fires of stress and turmoil
With the blue night's soft-falling rain.

30 July 1908

* * *

Life's breathed the grave into my face,
So I must breathe no stormy passions,
But one dream never fails to show me
The one way out with firm insistence;

Fill, fill your music with a corpse's
Poisons no human eye can see,
Envenoming the hearts of people
With wrathful scorn's maturity.

March 1909

* * *

To Evgeni Ivanov

When, going into this world's vastness,
You seek for oneness all in vain;
When you stare at the shadowy corner
And wait for death to stake its claim;

Threatening the thunder; the children sobbed, the women
Bound kerchiefs round their hair.

And I, my strength gone, left the ranks, fell back.
Others came up to join me in a crowd.
There were no more blue skies for us, the sun
Entered a thundercloud.

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When, going into this world's vastness,
You seek for oneness all in vain;
When you stare at the shadowy corner
And wait for death to stake its claim;

When you feel bitter, or are ailing,
Consumed by passion or distress –
Believe me, yours is still the freedom
To take pride in your happiness!

But when you are immune to boredom,
Terror and love, and nothing's
left,
And when your visions have been
sullied
By ageing blood no longer swift –

Then you are robbed indeed, and naked:
Death only thrives on weariness,
But life, that does not know extinction
Need do no more than slow its pace.

March 1909

* * *

The spring day at the uncleaned
window
Went by with nothing done at all,
And, like a captive bird, my wife
Was bored and sang behind the wall.

Coolly and calmly I assembled
Memories, records of things done,
And it was cruelly clear that life
Had made its little stir and gone.

They will return, the thoughts,
the quarrels,
But all will be so dark and dull;
Why trouble, then, to pull the blinds
down?
Day's long been over in the soul.

March 1909

* * *

Tight is the circle of existence:
Even as all roads lead to Rome,
Our lot's the slavish repetition
Of everything in time to come.

I'm haunted by a dream, like others,
That, when the cycle brings rebirth,
Once more I'll love Her up in heaven,
Once more betray her here on earth.

June 1909

THE COMMANDER'S FOOTSTEPS

To V A Zorgenfrei

Thick and heavy curtains screen the doorway,
    Night mist fogs the window pane.
Now what price your liberty, Don Juan,
    Since you've learned what fear can mean?

Cold and empty is the sumptuous bedroom,
    Servants sleeping–it's the dead of night.
But a cock crows somewhere in a distant
    Land that's beautiful and bright.

What are sounds of joy, though, to a traitor?
    Numbered are his hours, it seems.
Donna Anna sleeps, hands clasped upon her bosom,
    Donna Anna dreams...

Whose face with the coarse and cruel features
    In the mirror coldly gleams?
Anna, is it sweet inside the coffin?
    Is it sweet to dream unearthly dreams?

Life is empty, mad, unfathomable,
    Come on out to battle, ancient doom!

In reply – triumphant and enamoured –
    Hear the horn sound in the snowy gloom.

Black and silent as an owl, a motor
    Sends its light into the dark ahead.
Straight into the house stalks the Commander,
    With a slow and heavy tread...

Door wide open. Through the terrible cold,
    Like the sound of hoarse clock chimes
                                        is heard
Clearly: "You invited me for dinner.
    Here I am. Are you prepared?.."

There's no answer to that cruel question.
    There's no answer. Silence all the while.
In the sumptuous bedroom it is daybreak.
    Servants sleep and night is turning pale.

At the hour of dawn it's cold and eerie.
    At the dawn hour, night is grey.
Maid of Light! Where are you, Donna Anna?
    Anna! Anna! Silence. No reply.

Now the clock strikes in the mists of morning,
    For the last time strikes the hour.
As you die, she'll rise, fair Donna Anna.
    Anna shall rise up once more.

September 1910-16 February 1912

From IAMBICS (1907-1914)

Fecit indignatio versum*

Juven Sat I, 79

Dedicated to the memory of my late sister, Angelina Alexandrovna Blok

* * *

Oh, I would live life to extremes,
Eternalise all that's essential,
Make human everything impersonal,
Fulfil all unaccomplished dreams!

---

* Indignation makes the verse *(Lat)—Ed*

Though life is but a nightmare vision,
Though it may stifle me one day–
Some youth of happier disposition
Perhaps in time to come will say:

Let us forgive him all his sadness:
Could that have moved him secretly?
He was the child of light and goodness,
He was triumphant liberty!

5 February 1914

* * *

With ear close to the ground,
I listen.
I'll not cry out to you at all.
Groaning too hoarsely in the darkness,
You weary your immortal soul.
Come, rise, catch fire, and burn away,
Come, lift your trusty hammer high.
That living lightning smash
the darkness
Impenetrable to the eye!
You burrow, subterranean mole!
Your voice is laboured, harsh with
pain.
Hurry. Their poleaxe–don't forget it–
Will fell the weak and sickly grain.
Come out into the open, pushing
Up through the evil earth like corn.
For after their chance victory
The shadows of the tomb shall swarm.
Tend, water, hide that virgin land.
Spring will pass by, and then above
The soil that your own blood
has watered
Shall ripen a new kind of love.

3 June 1907

* * *

By secret, by nocturnal pathways
Lit by funereal sunset skies,
Shall come the much tormented victims
Of those whom vampires shall surprise.
Nocturnal spectres shall crowd in on
All that they think, and do, and say,
And then their all-too-sated bodies,
Though still alive, shall rot away.
Their ships at sea shall not recover
The rusty anchors that they've lost,
And they won't have the time to sing
Your requiem, pot-bellied priest!
All of you, glutted and complacent,
Away, to your dark coffins flee!
So bids *the greatness of the era*
And rosy-fingered destiny!
Be free, remove those tilted coffins
From mighty shoulders, hurl them down!
May all turn into dust and ashes
Under the fierce, relentless sun!

3 June 1907

* * *

In starving and in anguished thralldom
The days and years drift slowly past.
When will the rustling cornfield ripen,
The humbled people breathe at last?

With summer here, the corn, now bending,
Now straightening, whispers in the gloom
All night, stirred by a secret wind:
The time for blossoming has come.

The flower of earth's flower is the people,
Beauty and joy to all the flowers:

Not to miss God's own season, summer—
That blessing also can be ours.

15 February 1909

* * *

They do not sleep, remember, barter.
Tearing the night to pieces, over
The city's darkness like a groan
The silver chimes of Easter hover.

Over the helpless human creature
That they've beat down into the ground,
Over the stench, the death, the anguish
The frantic chiming bells resound...

Over all in this world that's trivial,
Over all for whom help's denied;
And they are also ringing over
The warm fur wrap you wore that night.

30 March 1909
Revel

* * *

How heartily you laughed at us,
How heartily you loathed us too,
Because in certain quiet verses
We loudly reprimanded you!
But we're unchanged. We are the poets;
For you, about you we are yearning,
Once more, the sacred love protecting,
The vows of olden times affirming...
Our is the same old simple shrine,
We read the writing on the wall...

So laugh, and do not read our lines,
Or take our word for it at all,
That underground sing hidden streams
And that worlds roam the firmament...

But think of Tyutchev's testament:
Be silent, hide, do not give vent
To your own feelings and your dreams...

January 1911

* * *

I'm Hamlet, and my blood runs cold
When intrigue works its deadly art.
First love for her, my one and only
On earth, still lives within my heart.

Life's cold has borne you, my Ophelia,
Somewhere a long, long way from here.
I die, a prince in my own country,
Stabbed by a poisoned rapier.

6 February 1914

* * *

So now those stormy years are over.
The peasant once again can tread
The moist, black furrow. I can hear
Spring's pinions beating overhead...

Terror, light-headedness and anguish...
Again spring whispers to me, "*Rise!*"
I reverently kiss her garment
Not visible to human eyes.

The blood begins to feel too youthful,
The heart beats far too fast and loud,
The moment that I glimpse my first love
Behind some fleecy-feathered cloud.

Forget, forget that world of terror,
Fly yonder with your pinions beating...
No, there were others at the banquet,
No, no, there shall be no forgetting.

14 February 1909

* * *

Yes, inspiration so commands me:
My vision, being wholly free,
Is drawn to where all's degradation,
And dirt, and gloom, and poverty.
And yet I love this world of horror;
Through it I glimpse another one,
A promised land that's full of beauty,
A land that's simple and humane.
But if you neither sow nor harvest,
If you're just human, as you say–
What can you know? How can you venture
Judgement in this mad century?
Have you not been reduced by sickness,
Poverty or starvation ever?
Have you not seen children in Paris?
Beggars in winter by the river?
Open your eyes, open them quickly,
To life's unfathomable horrors,
Before the great storm that's impending
Destroys all in this land of yours.
But do not let your proud wrath strike
The ones who bear life's heavy burden.
Another sowed the seeds of evil,
And yet that sowing was not barren...
He's right, who has at least rejected
Life's cheap cosmetic show outright,

And, like the timid mole, has burrowed
Underground, hiding from the light,
And wilted there, his whole life hating
That light and railing at it so,
Not even looking to the future,
And saying to the present, "No!"

September 1911

* * *

My earthly heart turns cold once more,
I brave the frosts with dauntless breast.
Love undivided I still bear
For people in the desolate waste.

But after love is gone, rage grows,
Contempt mounts higher, with the obsession
To read in young men's and girls' eyes
Oblivion or dedication.

Let them exclaim: "*Forget that, poet!*
Back to your sanctuaries fair!
No! Better die in the freezing air!
There's no escape. No peace. No quiet.

1911–6 February 1914

* * *

In all the fire and cold of troubles–
So life shall pass. God's willed it for
Us both to meet beside the tombstone
At expiation's dreaded hour.

From all the unhappy generations
There shall arise a fair new age.

With reason each tribe's glorified
By genius it has so outraged.

And all, like him, are sore offended
Deep in their hearts, their singing hearts.
For all, the holy sword of battle
Shines in the inevitable clouds.

Our testament to youths and maidens
Is still (though that day's far away):
Scorn into wrath must surely ripen,
And wrath matured is mutiny.

Play life as if it were a forfeit.
The hearts of poets are listening;
In their disquiet, strong wills lie latent;
So the black diamond, slumbering

In a strange trance past understanding,
Lies spellbound, motionless for long,
Long years deep underground until
The miner's pick strikes up its song.

1910-6 February 1914

From ITALIAN POEMS
(1909)

Sic finit occulte sic multos decipit aetas,
Sic venit ad finem quidquid in orbe manet
Heu heu praeteritum non est revocabile tempus,
Heu propius tacito mors venit ipsa pede *

Inscription under the clock in the church of Santa Maria Novella (Florence)

RAVENNA

All that is fleeting, all that passes,
You've buried in antiquity.
A babe in arms, you're lulled, Ravenna,
By dreamy-eyed eternity.

---

* Thus the years imperceptibly destroy so many,
Thus whatever abides on earth gradually comes to an end
Alas, alas, past time is beyond recall,
Alas, death itself comes nearer on silent feet *(Lat)—Ed*

Slaves through the Roman Gates bring
cartloads
Of brilliant-hued mosaics no longer,
And on the walls of cool cathedrals
The gilt begins to lose its lustre.

From the slow kisses of the dampness,
Much mellower the stone vault seems
Where moulder the sarcophagi
Of once-famed holy monks and queens.

The burial halls are wrapped in silence,
Shady the entrance, cool the air,
That blessed Galla should not waken
And sear the stone with her black stare.

The gory signs of martial conflict
Are all forgot, erased at last,
For fear Placidia, resurrected,
Should sing the passions of years past.

A long way has the sea retreated,
And by the ramparts, roses bloom,
That Theodoric, deep in his slumbers,
Of this life's tempest should not dream.

The wastelands of deserted vineyards,
People and houses are coffins all!
Only the bronze of solemn Latin
Rings like a stirring trumpet call.

Only the meditative, tranquil
Eyes of Ravenna's girls betray
A hint of sorrow for the ocean
Irrevocably far away.

Only at night, facing the valleys,
Foreseeing ages yet to be,
Does Dante of the eagle profile
Sing of the fair New Life to me.

May-June 1909

To Evgeni Ivanov

2

From the lagoon a cold wind blowing.
Gondolas like sarcophagi.
Tonight, lusty of frame and youthful,
At the Lion Column's foot I lie.

Up on the tower, two giants are striking
Midnight with iron boom after boom.
San Marco's carved iconostasis
Drowns in the moonlit-drenched lagoon.

Along a gallery of the palace,
Half in the light, half in the shade,
With furtive footsteps goes Salome,
Bearing my bloody severed head.

Palaces, people – all are sleeping.
The gliding phantom makes no sound.
On a black dish the head peers sadly
Into the darkness all around.

August 1909

3

The stubborn roar of life is fading,
The tide of worries ebbs away.
The breeze is singing through black velvet
About the life to be one day.

Shall I awake in some strange country,
Not here upon this gloomy strand,
And sigh at memories, when dreaming
Of life here in this present land?

Who'll father me? Doge's descendant,
Merchant, or fisherman, or priest,

With my own future mother lying
In the far future's swirling mist?

Or, maybe, charming some Venetian
Girl with the strains of a canzone,
Does my next father through the music
Already have foreknowledge of me?

A new-born babe, am I predestined,
In different times long after ours,
To open weak and trembling eyelids
There, where the Lion Column towers?

Mother, what are those soft strings playing?
Or do you dream that you must soon
With sacred shawl tenderly shield me
From evening breeze and chill lagoon?

No! All that is or was, is living!
Dreams, visions, thoughts–let them take flight!
The swift wave of the tide returning
Sweeps all into the velvet night!

26 August 1909

FLORENCE

1

Die, Florence, traitress, vanish into
The twilight of antiquity!
In true love's hour I shall forget you,
Come death, with you I shall not be!

O, Bella, laugh at yourself, for truly
You are no longer beautiful!
Your lineaments are sore disfigured
By the grave's wrinkles, dank and foul.

Your motor-cars are hoarse and strident,
Your houses all affront the eye,

And to the yellow dust of Europe
You've given yourself too willingly.

Now in that dust the cycles jingle
Where once a saintly monk was burned,
Where Leonardo plumbed the darkness,
Where in blue dreams Beato yearned.

You trouble the proud Medici,
You trample your own lilies down,
But in the dust and noise of commerce
No resurrection shall be found.

The nasal whine of Mass, the putrid
Fragrance of roses in the churches –
All of that multi-storeyed yearning –
Rot in the purifying ages!

May-June 1909

5

A black sky and bright loggia windows.
The Palazzio searchlight's ablaze.
She walks by, all dressed up in her finest,
With a smile on her swarthy young face.

But the wine's begun blurring my vision
And is coursing like fire through my veins.
Oh, what song shall I sing, Signorina?
Oh, what music will sweeten your dreams?"

June 1909

6

Dulled by the sultry heat of Florence,
In feeling you are even poorer;
The steps outside the church are silent,
And joylessly the gardens flower.

So cherish what is left of feeling,
At least preserve the creative lie:
Only in art's unstable dinghy
Can you escape the World's ennui.

17 May 1909

7

Like pale-blue smoke a-drifting,
The heat of evening rises,
King of the Tuscan vales...

And swiftly, swiftly, swiftly,
On bat-like wings it rushes,
Under the lamps it sails...

And see, down in the valleys,
A host of lights all gleaming;
And, see, in the shop-windows,
Jewels in answer shining.
The mountains veil the city
In twilight gently falling,
The girls strike up a ditty,
Around the piazza strolling.

Now fumes the dusty iris,
And lightly, lightly bubbles
The wine called Tears of Christ...

Florence, deceiver, traitress,
In your singed crown of roses,
Come, sing, dance at the feast!

Turn heads with a canzone
Of love that's not betrayed,
Let there be sleep for no one,
Strike till the strings give way.
Rattle your tambourine,
Let no one see you cry!
Your soul is doomed to pine
In some dark alley-way.

August 1909

SIENNA CATHEDRAL

When thoughts of sudden death appall you,
When a mist seems to cloud your days,
Then on the stones of the cathedral
Turn your exhausted, jaded eyes.

Tell me, where dwells night everlasting?
Here, in this place. For, trembling, foaming,
The Sybil's lips in violent frenzy
Give warning of the Second Coming.

Accomplish your terrestrial business,
Accept your years, be satisfied.
Here, all over which we muse and ponder
Is captured by the chisel blade:

A little boy with bird and flower,
A man with scroll held in his hands,
And, at a tomb, on two sticks leaning,
Head bowed, a doddering ancient stands.

Be silent, soul. Don't touch or torture,
Don't summon, don't compel or bind:
The hour of love, stern, clear as crystal,
Shall come for certain in the end.

June 1909

* * *

Art is a burden on the shoulders,
And yet we poets nonetheless
Appreciate life's fleeting trifles!
How sweet to yield to idleness,
To feel the hot, pulsating bloodstream
Course singing freely through the veins,
To catch behind the fleeting cloudlet
The love that suddenly inflames,
To dream that life itself has risen

In champagne sparkle and éclat,
All in the gently purring crackle
Of the fast-flickering cinéma.
A year goes by – another country,
A city that you've never seen,
A crowd, and then the charming features
Of that same French girl on the screen!..

June 1909
Foligno

From MISCELLANEOUS POEMS (1908-1916)

TO MY FRIENDS

> Be silent, you fiddles, confound you!
>
> *A. Maikov*

We're inwardly seething with envy
We're hostile and deaf to each other,
If we could but banish this hatred
That goes on for ever and ever!

But what can we do? Each has poisoned
His house till it's past human aid.

The walls are all dripping with venom,
There's nowhere to lay down one's head.

So what can we do? Disenchanted,
We laugh till our sanity's gone.
And, drunk, in the street, we stand watching
Our houses crash down to the ground.

We're traitors in life and in friendship,
We squander our words without sense,
But what can we do? For we're clearing
The way for our yet unborn sons.

When, under some fence in the nettles,
My own wretched bones lie a-rotting,
Some future historian will accomplish
A prodigious exploit of writing...

And all to inflict cruel torments
On kids who've not done any harm
With dates (birth and death) and revolting
Quotations as long as your arm.

A pitiful fate–all one's lifetime
To experience heaven and hell,
Then be a dull lecturer's victim
And spawn other critics as well...

Plunge into fresh weeds by the wayside,
Let total oblivion fall;
Be silent, you volumes, confound you–
I just didn't write you at all!

24 July 1908

THE POETS

Not far from the town, there sprang up a quarter
On marshy and treacherous soil.
The poets lived there: each one greeted the other
With a proud, supercilious smile.



07

In vain did the sun rise and shine in the sky
Above that unfortunate bog:
The denizens there all devoted their day
To wine and the workaday slog.

And when they were tipsy, they swore
to be buddies,
And argued with cynical acuity.
Next day they were sick. Then,
immured in their studies,
They worked with a dense assiduity.

When out of their kennels like house-dogs
they crawled,
To find the sea glittering and glowing,
They fell for a passing girl's braids
of bright gold
With a flair for the thing they were doing.

Romantics, they dreamed of a Golden Age coming,
They cursed all the publishers loudly.
They shed bitter tears over each flowret blooming,
And over each pearly white cloudlet.

That's how the poets lived. Dear reader and
friend,
D'you think their lives worse of a muddle
Than your daily struggles that never shall end,
Than your little philistine puddle?

No, no, reader, what a blind critic you are!
Far be it from me to delude you:
The poet has his Golden Age, clouds, braided hair,
The things that will always elude you.

Content you shall stay with yourself, with your
spouse,
And with your docktailed constitution,
But as for the poet, it's a world-wide carouse
That he wants, not some dry institution.

Though I die like a dog in a ditch when I go,
Though life may have harshly oppressed me,

I'll believe it was God who engulfed me in snow,
And the wild, whirling blizzard that kissed me.

24 July 1908

* * *

All that is over, over, over.
The cycle of the days at last
Is all complete. What lie, what power
Is able to bring back the past?

One crystal-clear and sparkling morning
Beneath the Moscow Kremlin wall,
Will my own native soil return me
The first sweet ecstasies of soul?

Or, over the Neva one Easter,
When the night's windy, cold and black,
Will some old beggar woman trouble
My peaceful body with her crook?

Or, in the glade I loved so dearly,
To autumn's rustling refrain
Will the young kite peck my cadaver
Under the cold and misty rain?

Or, in an hour of starless longing,
Within four hostile walls, shall I
Just go to sleep between chill bedsheets
By force of iron necessity?

And in some new life, very different,
Will my old dream just fade away;
Shall I recall the Doges, as
I think of Kalita today?

No, no–they cannot leave no traces,
All that I loved so much before,

All this poor life's thrills and
commotion,
All this unfathomable fire!

August 1909

THE SUGAR ANGEL

The doors are closed, but through a crevice
The sugar angel looks to see
The little children playing, dancing
Around the festive Christmas Tree.

Their nanny lights the nursery stove;
The firewood crackles, flames burn bright...
The angel's melting now. He's German.
He can feel neither pain nor heat.

At first, the tiny wings drip slowly,
The head lolls back, falls suddenly.
The sugar feet are next to suffer–
In a sweet puddle now they lie...

But even that is doomed to vanish.
The mistress comes–no angel there.
Old nannie's in a dreadful bother,
She mumbles, can't remember where...

Disintegrate, and melt, and perish,
You fragile figments of our dreams,
While real events blaze ever brighter,
While life itself pulsates and teems!

So die, then! You mean nothing to us!
Let her but once, should she recall
The past, weep tears for you in secret,
That playful little child, the soul.

25 November 1909

THE DREAM

To my mother

I dreamed a dream: we two lie buried
Inside an ancient vault; life teems
Above us, louder and more ugly,
And then the Day of Judgement comes.

The dawn of Resurrection glimmers,
And there is heard a distant clarion.
Above us loom the red, red stones
And mausoleum of cast iron.

He walks out of the hazy distance,
And, with him, angels bearing swords;
Just as we'd read it in those volumes
That left us unconvinced and bored.

And underneath that same vault's archway
My wife all calm and peaceful lies;
But freedom is not precious to her,
She does not wish again to rise...

I hear my mother whisper near me:
"You were so strong in life, my son.
If you press on the vault more firmly,
Then you will roll away the stone."

"No, mother. Here I have been stifled,
My strength's not what it used to be.
Pray, both of you, and bid the angel
Come roll away the stone for me".

20 June 1910

* * *

Once in our sleepy bay–remember?–
The waters lay becalmed and green,

When, unexpectedly, the warships
In line astern came sailing in.

Four grey ones. And a host of questions
Troubled us for an hour or more,
While sun-tanned, weather-beaten sailors
Walked past with an important air.

The world became exciting, bigger;
But they weighed anchor suddenly.
We watched all four go furrowing onwards
Into the night and out to sea.

Again the sea was merely humdrum,
The beacon, as if in dismay,
Began to blink when the last signal
Was semaphored across the bay.

How little in this life is needed
By children – that is, you and me.
The heart is happy to be happy
Even at the slightest novelty.

Find at the bottom of your pocket
Sand from some distant foreign shore –
The world seems suddenly mysterious,
Wrapped in a rainbow mist once more.

1911–6 February 1914

* * *

I bless all that has ever happened,
For better fate I never yearned.
O heart, how deep has been your loving,
O reason, with what fire you've burned!

Even though happiness and torment
Have left their bitter trace behind,
My guiding light has never left me
In storms or doldrums of the mind.

You, whom I plagued with what was
new,
Forgive me. We should always be
Together. What you lack
the words for,
Written upon your face I see.

The eyes are watchful and attentive,
The heart beats wildly in
the breast,
As on its true way it continues
Into the cold night's snowy mist.

15 January 1912

TO ANNA AKHMATOVA

Beauty's terrible, they'll tell you–
Round your shoulders languidly
You will draw a Spanish shawl,
Put a red rose in your hair.

Beauty's simple, they will tell you–
Awkward, with your flowered shawl
You will cover up the baby,
Let the rose lie on the floor.

But, as you are listening vaguely
To the words you hear around you,
You will suddenly turn pensive
And will murmur to yourself:

"I'm not terrible or simple,
Not so terrible that I would
Simply murder, or so simple
Not to know life's full
of terror."

16 December 1913

* * *

Again the flights of adolescence,
The bursts of strength, the extreme views...
There was no happiness, nor shall be.
At least that thought's no longer news!

Live through the dangerous years somehow.
Everywhere they are watching for you,
But if you should survive them safely,
You'll know a miracle's come true.

That happiness was never needed
You will in good time realise,
And that this dream, past all fulfilling,
Would not have lasted half your days;

And that the cup of true creative
Joy has already overflowed;
That all is ours, and mine no longer–
There's contact with the world outside.

And only smiling very gently
Will you remember nonetheless
The fragile childhood dream that people
Are used to calling happiness.

19 June 1912

* * *

No! You'll not break the spell upon my heart
With words, with beauty or with flattery.
To you I shall be alien, a stranger,
A ghost, a corpse, illumined by fantasy.

You will depart. You will press to your lips,
While you still dream, a certain snow-white
shroud.

All shall be dream: that someone has departed,
That you have watched three nights beside the dead.

Nurtured by dreams, all of them *beautiful,*
You'll heap reproaches upon destiny,
You'll decorate with the most tender flowers
The burial mound that in your dream you see.

The time will come: my shade shall pass before y.
First on the ninth, then on the fortieth day—
The still unknown, and *beautiful* and lifeless.
Did you not want it all to be that way?

But when time has extinguished all your sorrow,
You'll wish, though timidly at first, to live
By other dreams, by other fairy-tales...
Then it's a *simple* beauty that you'll crave.

Then *he* will come, familiar, long-awaited,
To rouse you from a sleep *not of this world.*
Into a different realm for one sweet moment
By the last spring you shall be swiftly whirled.

But I shall die, forgotten, unlamented,
On that day when your new friend comes at last,
Even at the moment when your pearly laughter
Tells him that your *infirmity* has passed.

You will forget my grave, forget my name...
You'll start from sleep: cold, empty it will be;
And there, in the embraces of another,
You will remember and cry out for me!

How desperately you'll reach out your arms
Into the empty night, unhappy one!
Alas! Life's noise can never reach the hearing
Of those consoled by spring's oblivion.

You'll curse the whole of life in terrible anguish
Because there is no one whom you can love!
But there's an answer in my troubled poems:
Their secret fire can tell you how to live.

15 December 1913

Must you bend your head in such confusion?
Look at me, and in your usual way.
See what you've become – humiliated
In the incorruptible light of day!

I, too, am my former self no longer;
I was bitter, proud, chaste and aloof,
And I look, more kindly and less hopeful,
On the tedium of this earthly life.

I not only have no right whatever,
I have not the strength to censure you
For the anguished, devious path that's taken
By so many other women too.

Somewhat differently from all the others
I have come to know your path, I think;
I know better than the ones who judge you
How you ended up here on the brink.

We were led along that brink together
By a fatal passion in our time:
We would shed the weary load forever
And soar up, only to fall again.

You had always dreamed that, in our burning,
We would be consumed, both you and I;
Briefly we would glimpse the blessed regions,
And, locked in each other's arms, we'd die.

What shall we do if our shared illusion,
Like all dreams, deceived us all along,
And if life, so cruelly unsparing,
Lashed us like a knout's rough twisted thong?

Busy life has little time to spare us,
And the dream did well to lie to us.
Even so, for just a while together,
Did not you and I find happiness?

Does this lock of hair, so golden shining,
Not come from the fire of former days?

You, so passionate, impious, lighthearted,
Unforgettable – forgive me, please!

1 October 1915

* * *

They will bury us deep down under,
And the grass will grow on our poor grave.
We shall hear the faint sound of rain falling
Upon earth, somewhere high, high above.

When we wake from our motionless slumbers,
There'll be no need to tell us, we'll know
That if the rain's quiet, then it's autumn,
And it's spring when the gusty winds blow.

We'll be grateful that rapture and longing
Don't intrude on those sounds up above,
For we're saved by the weight of the tombstone
From the torments of parting and love.

There's no need to make haste: here it's cosy,
And perhaps we'll be able to guess
What human minds meant when they spoke of
Life's meaning and meaninglessness.

18 October 1915

* * *

It's raining outside and it's slushy,
All your misery's wasted on air.
You're just about weeping with boredom
And your energy's going nowhere.

A profound, inexplicable yearning,
Nasty *thoughts in the brain ever teeming.*

Let's break up some firewood for kindling,
And get the old samovar steaming!

Though it's only around the tea-table,
Perhaps my disconsolate talk
Will make your eyes, though they be sleepy,
Light up with a haphazard spark.

So here's to the old-fashioned custom!
So here's to the life without haste!
For tea helps the soul banish sadness
As soon as it's had the first taste!

10 December 1915

* * *

You maintain that I'm cold, unresponsive and dry.
That's how I must be, I regret.
Not for flattering words did I temper my spirit,
Not for friendship keep struggling with fate.

You yourself at one time were much gloomier, bolder,
Looking up at the sky, you divined
That the nights yet to come would grow darker and darker,
With no telling where all this would end.

Now it's happened. The world has gone wild, and all round
Not a beacon gives out any light.
And whoever misread what was writ in the stars
Is engulfed in the darkness of night.

As for those who knew not that there once was a past,
And the future's no dark, empty nothing,
Their hearts have been dulled by the thirst for revenge,
And their mouths are all twisted with loathing.

Oh, there once was a time of great hope
and great faith,
I was simple and trusting, like you.
I approached the whole world
with an innocent heart
And no fear of what slander could do...

But today not a trace of those hopes will be found,
All have soared to the stars in the sky.
There were people in whom I once trusted sincerely,
But from them I must now turn away.

And the soul that was eager for thrills
and excitement –
That soul is no longer the same.
It has worn itself out with hating and loving
And forever extinct is the flame.

All that's left is a brow lightly creased
in a smile,
Tightened lips and the sad, sorry power
To inflame the insatiable blood of a woman
By kindling bestial desire...

So don't torture yourself with impotent groaning,
Don't batter in vain at the door.
You will win no compassion from those
wretched creatures
That were called human beings before.

You must cover your face with a cold mask of iron,
And be loyal to the sacrosanct graves,
Standing guard for a while over this paradise
That is wholly denied to mad slaves.

9 June 1916

From HARPS AND VIOLINS (1908-1916

* * *

A pipe on the bridge began to play,
    Apple trees were in flower.
The angel raised into the sky
    A solitary bright green star.
It simply took your breath away
To stand and look so high, so far,
    So deep into the sky.

"A star is risen," the pipe notes play:
"Come shepherds, drive your flocks away..."
Under the bridge, the waters say:
"Oh, look how swift the rapids stream,
Leave cares forever and a day,"
Such depths where clear the water gleams
I never saw until this day...
Such depths, all peaceful and serene
I never saw until this day...

Oh see how swift the water streams,
Oh say, when did you dream those dreams?..

22 May 1908

* * *

I too have loved. I too have suffered
Those amorous pangs that never end;
I too have known defeat and triumph,
The name of foe; that fine word–friend.

Yes, they were many... What do I know?
Just memories, the ghosts of dreams...
All I can do is vaguely murmur
In solitude their golden names.

Yes, they were many. But in one stroke
I gave them all a unity,
A rare and most mysterious beauty
Whose name is passion and life to me.

I consummated passion's ritual
And, rising over Earth, beheld
With my own eyes another woman
In fatal passion's power held.

The same caresses and endearments,
The hateful, hungry lips once more,
A fleeting glimpse of slender shoulders...
No! The world's passionless, empty, pure!

Filling my breast with mirth and laughter,
From summits clad in snow and mist,
I send an avalanche down into
The gorges where I loved and kissed.

30 March 1908

* * *

Cruel May with white nights shimmering!
Endless knocking at the gates: "Come out!"
Pale-blue haze left somewhere far behind me,
Unknown death and doom somewhere ahead!
Women with the staring eyes of madness.
Rose forever crushed upon the breast! –
Rise! Transfix me with your cruel sword-blades
That from passion I might be released!

It is good out in the open meadow,
Circling widely in the fiery dance,
Drinking wine and laughing with a loved one,
Making coronals and daisy chains,
Giving flowers to other pretty maidens,
Letting joy, grief, passion weary you –
But it's worthier to walk behind
The heavy plough in the clear morning dew.

28 May 1908

* * *

Dear overseas guests, go to sleep, may your dream be blissfu
Forget that darkness falls on the cage we struggle in.
That shooting stars form glittering threads of silver,

That in the full glass of wine, gold serpents
are wriggling

When all of these threads are entwined
in a glittering path,
When all of the serpents weave into
a single infinity
They will lift, spin and throw
the unwanted birdcage
Down into the bottomless chasm
of blue eternity.

30 July 1908

* * *

I'm nailed up to a tavern counter.
I've long been drunk. I'm past
all care.
There goes my happiness on a troika
Into the silver-smoky air...

Borne on a troika, plunging into
The mist of ages, the snows of time...
The horses' hooves kick up a silver
Darkness to lash this soul of mine...

Sparks hurled into the pitch-black
darkness
Make the whole night as bright as day.
The bell beneath the shaft-bow murmurs
That happiness is fled away...

The horses' glittering golden trappings
Are all I hear... Are all I see...
But you, my soul... My soul in darkness...
Are drunk as drunk as drunk can be...

26 October 1908

* * *

All on this earth must pass – your mother, youth;
A wife betrays, friends leave you suddenly,
So learn to enjoy a different sweetness; look at
The freezing Arctic regions carefully.

Take your small boat, sail to the distant pole
In walls of ice, and quietly forget
What was for you a land of blazing passions,
And how they loved there, came to grief,
and fought...

And teach your weary soul how to withstand
The shimmer of the slowly freezing air,
So that out *here*, it won't need anything
When beams of light come darting back from *there*.

7 September 1909

* * *

I'm with a gypsy girl in heaven,
Though proud and cold I used to be,
And now I ask her very humbly,
"Gypsy girl, dance my life for me."

The dreadful dance goes on and on,
And all my former life is seen –
A crazy, drowsy, beautiful and
Utterly appalling dream...

She whirls her arms high up above her,
Writhes like a snake, and then she stands
Still, in a pose of languid boredom;
The tambourine falls from her hands...

Oh, I was once so rich in all things,
Now they're not worth a copper coin;

Such enmity, love, gold and gossip,
But deadly boredom in the main.

11 July 1910

* * *

Times, days there are when the heart's rudely
Invaded by a snowy gale.
And then no tender voice can save you,
Nor uncomplaining hours of toil...

You fly, a wild and frightened bird,
But look–blood in the sunset sky!..
And so love's madness swiftly travels
Its anguished, passionate, fiery way...

Half of the heart's a lowering storm-cloud;
Under it, all is deaf and dumb–
And she, the erstwhile simple being
Has changed and is no more the same.

It's dark and cheerful, but it's airless,
And you can hardly breathe at all.
Wholly subservient to another
Is your once proud, unyielding soul!

22 November 1913

* * *

She made fun of it at the beginning,
Understood, in reproachful surprise,
Shook her beautiful head in denial,
Began wiping the tears from her eyes.

And she laughed, teeth provocative shining,
Seemed to brush it aside with no trouble,

But remembered again, started sobbing,
And ten hairpins fell on to the table.

She walked off in a huff, then relented,
She returned and paused, thinking it over,
Turned her back on me suddenly, cursing,
And, presumably, left me forever.

Never mind, I must carry on working;
I've this time-honoured job to get done.
Can it be that life's made its last rustle,
Has just rustled and gone like your gown?

29 February 1916

* * *

So the years passed, one after another,
And because I was blind and a fool
It was only today that I dreamed it–
She had not even loved me at all.

I was only a casual encounter,
I was someone she met on the way,
But the infantile fever abated:
"It's farewell, then," was all she could say.

But my soul is as full of love's feeling as ever,
And all moments with others are poisoned for me:
I have still the same thought–and one song
Was my haunting dream music today.

30 September 1915

From CARMEN (1914)

To L A D

* * *

Even as the ocean changes hue
When, in a cloud's swift-looming form,
A momentary gleam breaks through –
So the heart in a singing storm
Begins to race, afraid to sigh,
Blood in the cheeks will burn the brighter,

And the breast choke with tears of joy—
And all to welcome Carmencita.

4 March 1914

* * *

Outside, the snowy spring is raging.
I lift my eyes up from my book...
O, fateful moment, when, while reading
Zuniga's hand, she casts a look
Directly up at Don José.
Her eyes shine with a mocking twinkle
The pearly teeth gleam sparkling white,
And I forget all nights,
all days,
The blood comes rushing to my heart
Driving all thoughts of home away...
And her voice sings: *merely for loving,*
You shall pay with your life to me.

18 March 1914

* * *

Of Carmen's numerous admirers
Who chase her in a crowd, and call
On her to follow on behind them,
One, like a shadow by the wall
Of Lillas-Pastia's night tavern
Is silent and looks on alone,
Nor waits, nor asks to join
the throng.
But when he hears the tambourine
And heels begin their hollow drumming,
He recollects the days of springtime;
And, to the music's raging passions

movements
And in them sees creative visions.

26 March 1914

* * *

Oh yes, love, like a bird, is free,
Yes, I'm yours just the same!
Yes, I shall see your fiery form
In sweet dream after dream!

Yes, the fierce strength of lovely
arms,
Eyes sad with treachery,
Are all my fever of vain passion
And give no peace to me!

I shall sing songs of you,
to heaven
I shall lift up your voice!
And to the stars to win your fire
Priest-like, I'll sacrifice.

And in the river of my verse
Like a storm wave you'll rise,
And from my hand I shall not wash
Your perfume's lingering trace.

And in the silence of the night
Though for the briefest while,
Your haunting face shall shine upon me
And smile its dazzling smile.

Yes, I'm tormented by sweet longings,
That, when you are abroad,
You will from time to time in secret
Bestow on me a thought.

Carmen, through life's storms and alarms,
    Through all sad treachery,
Let that one thought be strict and bright,
    As is a road, simple and white,
    Or journey far away.

28 March 1914

From HOMELAND (1907-1916)

* * *

You've gone away, and in the desert
Down to the burning sand I bow,
But not a single word that's prideful
Can my tongue seek to utter now.

With no regrets for what has happened,
I understand so much at last:

Yes. You're my native Galilee
To me, the unresurrected Christ.

So let another one caress you,
Let the wild word by him be spread
To all the world: the Son of man
Does not know where to lay his head.

30 May 1907

* * *

Heights thickly overgrown with forest:
There, in the long-forgotten past,
Our fathers built a shining house
And sang in honour of their Christ.

But now no herdsman's knout
will whistle,
No pipes will ever play up there;
Only damp moss hangs from the cliff-edge
Like an old hag's bedraggled hair.

The drowsy eyelids of the mosses
Are closed for all eternity.
They sleep, lulled by the dreamy languor
Of silence, man's old enemy.

You shall not scare the dismal heron
From his marsh hummock, cold and damp;
But each slow, rusty drop of water
Gives rise to river, lake and swamp.

And rusty drops of forest water
In silence and in darkness born,
Bear to a terror-stricken Russia
A Christ who shall destroy and burn.

October 1907–29 August 1914



1916

ON KULIKOVO FIELD

1

The river rises, brooding, flowing idly,
Washing its muddy banks.
Above the ochrous cliff-side, hayricks sadly
Wait in their silent ranks.

Russia! My wife! Ours is the way of sorrow:
Pain without rest.
Our way strikes clean as the ancient Tatar arrow
Piercing the breast.

Our way is of the steppes, in grief unending.
Russia, that grief is yours!
Even the darkness, alien and impending.
I fear no more.

Come night, we'll gallop on. Across the plain
Our bivouac fires shall blaze.
Our colours and the cold steel of the Khan
Shall glitter through the haze...

Eternal battle! Through blood and dust-clouds, peace
Is only a dream, alas!
Across the steppe a frantic wild mare flees,
Trampling the grass...

And still no rest. Cry "Stop!" But faster, faster
The leagues flash by.
The storm clouds flee, the storm clouds flee in terror—
Blood in the sky!

Blood in the sky! And red the heart's blood flowing.
Weep, heart, weep!
No rest. And on the wild mare thunders, flying
Across the steppe!

7 June 1908

2

No misgivings, no returning ever,
    When we halted on the midnight plain.
Swans that screamed by the Nepryadva river
    Screamed again, again and yet again...

White there shone a burning stone before us,
    Tatars swarmed beyond the riverside.
High above our serried ranks of warriors
    Nevermore the radiant flag would ride.

Then, with head bowed low, as if in prayer,
    Said my friend besides me: "Whet your blade.
When we join in battle with the Tatar,
    Let our cause prevail, though we lie dead."

No first warrior I, nor yet the last one.
    Long our land shall suffer pain and strife.
Say a prayer for me this day at Matins,
    Dearest friend and loved one, radiant wife!

8 June 1908

3

When across the plains on to the bridges
    Swarmed the Tatar foe,
We were in the darkling fields together–
    Surely Thou didst know?

In the meadows by the dark, ill-omened
    Waters of the Don,
There I heard Thy voice with heart prophetic
    Crying with the swans.

To the scene our Prince's army galloped
    Like a rushing cloud.
Far away, a mother seized the stirrup,
    Wailed her grief aloud.

Birds of night foregathered, soaring, gliding,
    Circling very high.

Guardian to our Prince, the summer lightning
Flitted through the sky.

Eagles cried out doom upon the Tatar,
Shrieking in the night.
Like a princess, the Nepryadva River
Veiled herself in white.

With the mist above the sleeping river
Towards me Thou didst glide,
Clad in flowing rays of light... My charger
Still was not afraid.

On my sword of steel, like molten silver,
Gleamed the holy light;
Glanced upon my shoulder, made my dusty
Chain mail glitter bright.

And at daybreak, when the Tatars gathered–
Thunderclouds of war–
In my shield your visage shone unearthly,
Radiant evermore.

14 June 1908

4

Once more with the sorrow of ages
The grasses are stricken and bowed;
Once more through the mist on the river
I hear your voice calling aloud.

All gone are the herds of wild horses,
All fled without trace from the plain.
Dark passions are burgeoning under
The yoke of the moon on the wane.

And I, with the sorrow of ages,
A wolf when the moon's on the wane,
Go wandering helplessly, wondering
Wherever I'll find you again.

I hear the far thunder of battle,
And shouts like shrill trumpets that blow;
I see a vast fire over Russia
That sets the clouds softly aglow.

And, burdened with anguish and sorrow,
I speed on a stallion white.
The clouds that come flying to meet me
Rush past in the blackness of night.

Oh, bright are the thoughts that arise in
My heart in its sorrow and pain;
But now the bright thoughts are all turning
To ash in a living black flame.

"Then shine on me, wonder of wonders,
And teach me the secret of light!"
My stallion trembles to follow
The summons of arms in the night...

31 July 1908

5

A fatal cloud of doom spread over
The brilliance of the dawning day

Vl Soloviev

Now on the field of Kulikovo
The gathering pall is come to stay,
And like a brooding cloud spreads over
The brilliance of the dawning day.

And in the silence, deep and deathly,
And in the murk that fills the sky,
No thunder of prodigious battle,
No lightning flash of mortal fray.

Yet this, I know, is the beginning
Of turbulent and inspiring days!
Look yonder, where the swans go winging
With terror in their trumpet cries!

No peace within; the heart is restless,
The storm clouds gather in the sky.
Heavy these arms, as before battle...
Your fatal hour approaches. Pray!

23 December 1908

RUSSIA

Again, as in the golden years,
Three ragged breech-straps loosely swinging,
And, in the cart-track's clogging mire,
The brightly painted wheel-spokes sinking...

O Russia, half-starved, beggarly Russia,
Your humble cabins, mean and grey,
Your songs, wild as the wind and wayward,
Are like first tears of love to me!

I cannot give to you my pity,
And I must duly bear my cross...
Bestow your fierce and untamed beauty
On any charmer of your choice!

Let him seduce you, then deceive you,
You shall not vanish, nor yet fade,
Your loveliness shall never leave you,
Though care in time may cast its shade...

What of it? One more care, one tear
To swell the river's murmuring flow;
But you are timeless – forest, meadow,
The embroidered kerchief on the brow...

And the impossible is possible;
Easy the journey now, though long,
When two eyes, bright beneath a kerchief
Shine in the distance and are gone,
And when the yearning of the jailhouse
Throbs in the coachman's lonely song.

18 October 1908

AUTUMN DAY

Across the stubble field, my friend,
We slowly walk together.
As in the darkened village church,
The heart is brimming over.

The autumn day is clear and hushed,
Save that a rook is cawing,
Calling its fellows in the flock,
While an old woman's coughing.

A haze of smoke hangs near the barn
Where the damp hay is drying,
And with a long and lingering gaze
We watch the slow cranes flying.

They fly across the sky obliquely,
Their leader's wailing, keening...
But why, but why that autumn cry?
Say, what can be its meaning?

More poor and humble villages
Than eye can count or measure,
And, in the failing light, a fire
Burns on a distant meadow.

What is your meaning to the heart,
Homeland, so poor, so poorly?
And you, poor wife, poor wife of mine,
Why do you weep so sorely?

1 January 1909

* * *

Russia mine, life of mine, must we suffer so together?
Tsar, Siberia, Yermak, and goal.

Surely it's time that we parted and repented...
When the heart is free, what can your darkness
ava

Did you have strange knowledge? Or believe
in some divini
How are we to tell what your songs are trying
to sa

Chudi were here, and the Meryans* travelled
Log-tracks, highways, set milestones on the way.

Fair were the ships and towns you built along
the rivers,
Even so you never reached Tsargrad
and its shrines...
Over the plains you loosed flocks of swans
and falcon
Darkness came rushing up swiftly
from those plains...

Over the Black Sea, over the White Sea,
Into black nights, and into white days,
Fierce is your countenance, silent, never moving,
Fierce are the flames that leap from Tatar eyes.

Silently lingers the crimson glow of sunset,
Nightly above where your sleeping warriors lie...
Why do you hypnotise me, far-away heat-shimmer,
Play with my spirit that was born to be free?

28 February 1910

ON THE RAILWAY

To Maria Pavlovna Ivanova

She lies and stares as if still living
From the embankment ditch down there,

* *Chudi, Meryans—ancient peoples.—Ed*

A lovely girl with coloured kerchief
Tied loosely round her braided hair.

Towards the whistling and the rumbling
Beyond the woods, with easy gait
She used to walk. Skirting the platform,
Under the roof she'd tensely wait.

Three bright and onward rushing eyes –
Cheeks' flush and body's forward strain:
Perhaps some stranger travelling past
Will see her through the window-pane...

The train went rumbling on as usual,
Its coaches juddering and creaking.
First Class and Second both were silent,
Third Class was filled with songs and weeping...

And some stood upright in the windows,
Surveying, calm and sleepy-eyed,
The platform, plots of withered bushes,
The girl, the policeman by her side.

Just once, a young hussar, arm resting
On the red velvet casually,
Gave her a smile, tender but fleeting,
And then was carried far away.

And thus went by a wasted girlhood,
Squandered on vain dreams from the start...
The iron yearning of the railway
Whistled until it broke her heart...

But she had lost her heart already:
So many deep, respectful bows,
So many, eager, hopeful glances,
At those blank railway-carriage eyes...

So don't go near her with your questions.
You couldn't care: past caring, she.
For whether crushed by love or wheels
Or dirt – great was her agony.

14 June 1910

Time of festival, wonderful festival,
But no star through the clouds can be seen...
You lie under a fierce, raging blizzard,
O ill-fated home country of mine.

In the snows, in the steppes, in the forests
I can see not a sign of your face.
Is there only this terrible vastness,
This bewildering, infinite space?

Sinking down in the depths of a snowdrift,
I climb into a ramshackle sleigh.
Wretched Rus of the bleak Finnish marshes,
In no sumptuous coffin you lie!

You pretend that you're just an old woman,
You pretend that you're pious, though poor,
That you're prayer, and the chiming
of church bells,
And those crosses—yet more, and still more...

But your blue frankincense very often
Seems like something far different to me...
No, beneath the bright Muscovy headscarf,
It's no pious old face that I see!

For behind the low bows and the candles,
Behind prayer, upon prayer, upon prayer,
I hear other words whispered in secret,
I see cheeks that are young and on fire.

Further, further... The gusty wind rises
And sweeps over the cold, barren waste...
And a bush by the way tosses skywards
Like the stole that's held up by a priest.

But beyond the flood tide of the river,
Where the feather-grass bows to the ground,
There's the free, bitter odour of wood-smoke,
And a faraway trumpeting sound...

Can it be the Polovtsian armies,
The fierce Tatar encampment again?
Are the bright Turkish fezzes like wildfire
Sweeping over the desolate plain?

But no prince's brave standard is flying,
And no helmets are dipped in the Don,
Nor does Varang's fair grand-daughter languish
In Polovtsian thralldom, alone...

And no fierce Cossack pigtails are flying,
And no hetman's bright pennants are seen...
No, those black shapes are tall factory chimneys,
Those are factory sirens that scream...

The way over the steppes is unending –
Steppes, and wind, and more wind – till there comes
A many-floored factory building,
And townships of working-class slums...

In the wilderness, savage, wide open,
You're the same, yet no longer the same.
You have turned a new visage towards me,
I am stirred by a different dream...

The black coal – subterranean Messiah,
The black coal – tsar and bridegroom out here,
But the voice of your stone songs, O Russia,
O bride, tells of nothing to fear!

The coal groans and the salt becomes whiter,
And unceasingly screams the iron ore...
Yes, above the bleak steppe-lands, the rising
New America shines like a star!

12 December 1913

* * *

The Petrograd sky was all turbid with drizzle
And a troop-train was bound for the war.

Platoon after platoon, men with rifles
and bayonets,
Filling carriages – more and still more.

On that train, in a thousand hearts suddenly
blossomed
Parting's anguish, the torments of love,
Strength, youth, hope... In the far distant sunset,
There was blood in the clouds up above.

As they settled themselves, some struck up
the *Varyag*,
And some the *Yermak*, out of key...
And they shouted "Hurrah!", and they joked,
and they laughed,
And they crossed themselves secretively...

The wind snatched up a leaf that was fluttering
down,
The guard's lantern winked on, began swaying,
And beneath the black clouds the high-spirited
bugler
Announced it was time to be going.

And the bugle wailed shrilly of martial glory,
And all present were filled with vague fear,
Till the rumbling of wheels and the engine's
hoarse whistle
Were drowned by a long, rousing cheer.

The last coach's rear buffers were lost
in the darkness,
And then silence descended till dawn.
As if grimly announcing: "It's time!",
a long cheer
Floated back from the fields in the rain.

No, we didn't feel sorry or sad, despite
rain-clouds
As far as the eye could see.
That was steel – that was clear, tough,
reliable steel;
What avail could our sorrow be?

For such pity is drowned by the flames
of the fires,
Drumming hooves and the thunder of guns,
And such sadness is laid by the poisoned mists
rising
From the bloody Galician plains...

1 September 1914

* * *

To Z N Hippius

Those born in eras of stagnation
Cannot recall their chosen way.
Children of Russia's terrible years,
We can't forget a single day.

Years of the holocaust! Could there be
Tidings in you of hope or madness?
From days of war, from days of freedom,
A bloody glow shines on our faces.

Dumbness prevails: the tolling tocsin
Demands that all lips must be sealed.
In hearts that once were so exalted
A fatal void is now concealed.

And even though above our deathbed
The flocks of croaking ravens rise,
O Lord, O Lord, let those most worthy
Upon Thy kingdom set their eyes.

8 September 1914

* * *

Wild, wild wind
On panes impinges,

Tearing shutters
Off their hinges.

Hour of Mass at Easter-time,
Far away the church bells chime,
All is black and desolate.
But the wind, rude guest of mine,
Comes and rattles at the gate.

All is black and void outside,
Crunch of footsteps fills the night,
There, the river ice is breaking,
There, my own true bride is waiting...

How cast off this evil spell,
Bid the unwelcome guest begone?
How not let my true-love fall
Victim to the accursed one?

I must leave all things behind,
Hope and joy forsaking,
If my visitor's the wind,
Nothing but the wild black wind,
And my house is shaking.

Wind, that on
The panes impinges,
Why tear shutters
Off their hinges?

22 March 1916

THE KITE

Describing circle after circle,
The wheeling kite looks down upon
A dream-like, empty meadow. A mother
Grieves in the cabin for her son:
"Here, suck this breast, here, take this bread,
Grow up, be humble, trust in God."

The ages pass, endless war rages,
Revolt flares, villages are burned,
But you are still the same, my homeland,
In beauty ancient and tear-stained.
How long must that poor mother cry,
How long the kite wheel in the sky?

22 March 1916

From THE SONG OF THE WIND (1913)

* * *

We're forgotten, alone on this earth,
But we'll sit in the warmth by the hearth.

In our cosy and snug little room,
We'll look out on the October gloom.

The lights twinkle out there as before,
But, my dear, we're not young any more.

All the storms that we once used to dread
Are behind us. So why look ahead?

Yet you stare, as if hoping to find
A glad message or news of some kind.

For the stormy bright angel you pine?
No, you can't make him come back again.

Just the walls, and the books, and the days.
There is nothing in them to amaze.

I want nothing, nor do I make moan,
What is over won't come back again.

But look, you have started to thread
A fine strand with bright bead after bead.

Time was... You remember it, when...
Oh, what wonderful years they were then!

You were younger, and they were much more
Brightly coloured, the silks that you wore,

And your hand used to dart to and fro...
Choose the brightest of shades even now,

And the silk that you thread through the eye
Will soon chase all the darkness away.

19 October 1913

* * *

Dearest, even in this peaceful dwelling,
    Fever racks me without cease.
By the fireside in a peaceful dwelling
    I shall never find a place!

Voices sing, the snowstorm howls, I fear
    Domesticity...

Even now, over your shoulder, dearest,
Someone's eyes are watching me!

Even now, behind your gentle shoulders,
Wings are fluttering...
Azrail, the angel of the storm –
And his eyes are glittering!

October 1913

POEMS NOT INCLUDED BY BLOK IN HIS LIFETIME EDITIONS (1898-1921)

* * *

For the brief dream that's gone tomorrow,
    Light as a breath,
The youthful poet will surrender
    Even to Death.

Not such am I: though dreams may hold me
    Bound in a trance,

If troubles come, I'll stretch my pinions
And cast dreams hence.

Again disquiet, again such strivings.
Again I am
Ready to hear songs of life's battle
Till new dreams come!

25 December 1899 (18 January 1919)

* * *

As I lay dying, you were thriving.
Looking at death's face, suddenly
You saw in my extinguished features
That this death was a helpless cry...

Temper your now belated anguish;
For, as my autumn days draw near,
Like a leaf fallen by the wayside
I'll join the dead ones lying there.

27 January 1900

* * *

On those days when the soul is troubled
By an excess of worldly cares,
Though you are far away, I see
Your palace gleam in distant spheres.

And so I strive with soul disquieted
To rest from life's storm for a time;
But this one joy is still denied me:
The road to you is hard to climb.

From there, a cold light-ray comes darting;
The cupola, all shining gold,

Is only for the soul untrammelled
By the great tumult of this world.

Your radiance will only dazzle
Eyes that by now all vision lack,
And then, stung to the quick by anguish,
The soul is fated to turn back

And go on living, and go on glimpsing
Your image in the distant haze,
Only with even greater loathing
For Earth's all-too-abhorrent ways.

7 February 1900 (21 May 1918)

* * *

To lay divine dreams at the feet
Of some strange idol you abhor,
And glorify the shrine of peace
In reek of murder and of war;

To scan the chill nocturnal darkness,
Discerning in it fire and light –
That, poet by God's grace and mercy,
Is your strange and relentless fate!

Spring 1900 (24 December 1914)

* * *

They parted with no sign of sorrow,
Forgetting joys they'd known before,
But yearned, could not be comforted,
And in the end they met once more.

Above them wept the youthful phantom
Of erstwhile beauty, faded now,

And violins, plangently wailing,
Aroused sad dreams of long ago.

But even so, their new encounters
Were always so serenely cold;
No flame of passion ever warmed them,
Nor tale the sobbing music told.

There were no secrets left between them,
All was dead, all was nullity...
In endless wanderings they faded
And mourned their lost divinity.

10 July 1900

THE SPHINX

The silent legend of the desert stirs,
The head is raised and held up high.
The words of outraged goddesses are trembling
Upon the tongue from which they'll fly...

The wrathful brow is furrowed by a wrinkle,
The claws flex downwards, curved and long...
"Love", that forgotten word, I'm going to hear
In a forgotten, living tongue...

But claws about to dig into the shifting
Sands are suddenly withdrawn ..
Again I face a kind of mystery,
Triumphant dream disclosed to none.

8 November 1902 (April 1918)

* * *

A damp summer. I'm lying
Ill in my bed. Something that burns and stings



1921

Keeps welling up from deep inside my chest.
Out in the garden, in the clear night shadows,
The dogs run round and round the house, barking.
Here in my own home, I'm just a stranger.
I have no sense of kinship with my kinfolk.
People are only slightly less abhorrent
Than the mosquito that I killed just now.
The candle has been shining for some time
Upon the page on which a dull professor
Nags in my ears, like a mosquito whining,
That woman here in Russia is oppressed,
And so her lot is like that of the worker.
Wait! Here's portrait: silver-haired professor,
His face all washed, hair smarmed; thirty-five
Editions of his book so far. But wait!
You tell me that the worker is oppressed?
No, wait! This spring, I saw a brave man,
A worker who will face death without flinching.
So would his friends. The furnaces will stop
And work grind to a halt in all the factories
At once. And then the corpulent factory-owner
Will bow down at the workers' feet. And wait!
You tell me that a woman is a slave?
I know a woman. In her soul there burned
A sheaf of fire. The wind was in her walk.
Her eyes were worlds of mourning and of passion.
And she was of the lightest mortal clay,
Trembling and willowy. And so, Professor,
In that one woman's body dwelt the union
Of all four elements. And she could kill,
Then she could resurrect. But you try killing
And resurrecting afterwards! You can't?
A woman can, and likewise can a worker.

20 June 1907

* * *

In the profound cathedral shadows
I've read the contents of your scroll;

Your voice is a prolonged and muffled
Groan from the choir–and that is all.

I have a need to try and test you;
There are so many seeking me,
The look that cannot be repeated,
The fire that burns eternally.

So here's my scroll in answer to you
Upon the wall, in that same spot,
Because, when you were trying to find me,
Such passionate torment was your lot.

It will be long before you know me,
At night, all sleep will pass you by.
Maybe you'll melt like wax and vanish,
Or maybe you will simply die.

Why should your groanings and your torments
And woes concern me anyway?
You're nothing but the clouded vision
Of other worlds far, far away.

Consider, are you really worthy?
You have been neither strong nor brave,
A pitiful, inglorious warrior,
A slothful and a cunning slave.

And if your sigh, "I love", comes to me,
A distant echo following after,
As with a whiplash I shall scourge you
With my ice-cold and thunderous laughter!

25 May 1908

TO PUSHKIN HOUSE

Name of Pushkin House in our
Academy of Sciences!

Name we all know and revere,
    More than just a name to us!

It's the ice in motion, ringing
    On the all-triumphant river,
It's the ships at sea exchanging
    Messages with one another

It's the Sphinx of legend gazing
    At the slow-retreating waves;
It's the stern bronze horseman racing
    On a mount that never moves;

Our impassioned sorrows by
    The Neva's mysterious flow;
How we met the grim black day
    With the white night's shimmering glow.

And for us the river opened
    Such bright vistas lapped in flame!
It was not those days we summoned
    But the ages yet to come!

Minding not the brief deception
    Of the dark, oppressive days,
We could see the distant future
    In a blue and rosy haze

Pushkin! We have learned to honour
    Secret freedom after you!
Lend a hand in stormy weather,
    Show us how to battle through!

Did we not find inspiration
    In the sweetness of your songs?
Was it not your joy then, Pushkin,
    That bore us on airy wings?

That is why we all revere
    What is more than name to us,
Name of Pushkin House, in our
    Academy of Sciences!

That is why, as day is ended,
    And into the night I go,
From the white square of the Senate
    I salute it with a bow.

11 February 1921

RETRIBUTION

Youth is retribution

Ibsen

FOREWORD

Feeling neither the necessity nor the inclination to finish a poem full of revolutionary forebodings in the years when the revolution has already taken place, I would like to preface the draft of the last chapter* with the story of how the poem was conceived, what were the causes of its emergence and where its rhythms began.

It is interesting and useful to oneself and others to recall the history of one's own work. Moreover, as the most happy or unhappy children of our century, we must remember our whole lives· all our years are sharply coloured for us and–alas! they cannot be forgotten, they are coloured too indelibly, so that each number seems written in blood; and we cannot forget them anyway, for they are written on our own faces.

The poem *Retribution* was conceived in 1910 and its main features were drafted out in 1911. What were those years like?

1910 saw the death of Kommissarzhevskaya, the death of Vrubel and the death of Tolstoy With Kommissarzhevskaya, a lyrical note died on the stage, with Vrubel–the enormous personal world of the artist, insane determination, insatiable searchings till reason itself was lost; with Tolstoy, human tenderness died–a wise humanity

Also in 1910 came the crisis of symbolism, about which much
was lost; with Tolstoy, human tenderness died–a wise humanity.
and in that of its opponents In this year, trends emerged which eventually adopted a position hostile both to symbolism and to one another: Acmeism, Egofuturism and the first shoots of Futurism. The watchword of the first of these trends was Man–but a different kind of Man, entirely lacking in humanity, a sort of "primaeval Adam"

The winter of 1911 was full of profound courageous inner tensions and excitement I remember nocturnal conversations from which first grew an awareness of the indivisibility and incoherence of art, life and politics. Thought which was, apparently, being stimulated by violent shocks from without, was at the same time knocking on all these doors, no longer satisfied with the incoherence of everything into a whole, which had been easy and possible in the true mystic obscurity of the years leading up to the first revolution, and also in the hangover of false mysticism that followed it.

It was the courageous trend that emerged supreme: the tragic consciousness of the incoherence and indivisibility of everything, the irreconcileable contradictions that demanded reconciliation The

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* *This foreword was written for the publication of Chapter Three of the poem* – *Ed*

harsh northern voice of Strindberg made itself clearly heard when he only had one more year to live. There was already a noticeable reek of burning, iron and blood. In the spring of 1911. P N. Milyukov read a very interesting lecture entitled "The Armed Peace and the Curtailment of Armaments". One of the Moscow newspapers published a prophetic article: "The Imminence of a Major War". In Kiev, Andrei Yushchinsky was murdered, and the question arose of the use of Christian blood by the Jews. That summer was exceptionally hot, so that the grass burned up; there were mass strikes by railway workers in London and the significant "Panther-Agadir" episode was enacted in the Mediterranean Sea.

Inseparably associated with all this for me was the craze for French wrestling in the Petersburg circuses; crowds of thousands were passionately interested in it. There were true artists among the wrestlers. I shall never forget the contest between an ugly Russian heavyweight and a Dutchman whose muscular system seemed like a perfect musical instrument of rare beauty.

It was in this year, finally, that aviation became particularly fashionable in Russia-we can all remember the beautiful loops, inverted flights, crashes, and the deaths of aviators, talented and mediocre alike.

Finally, Stolypin was murdered in Kiev that autumn, and this meant that the control of the country was to pass from the semi-nobility and semiofficialdom into the hands of the police department.

All these apparently diverse facts have a single musical meaning for me. I am accustomed to collecting facts from all the spheres of life that are within my range of vision at the time, and I am convinced that, taken as a whole, they build up a single musical pressure.

I think that the *iambic* is the simplest expression of the rhythm of that time, when the world was preparing itself for unprecedented events, was developing its physical, political and military muscles so vigorously and systematically. For a long time I had been driven about the world by the lashes of that iambic, and that is probably why I too was drawn to submit to its resilient wave for a more prolonged period of time.

I then began drafting out a long poem entitled *Retribution* I imagined its plan in the form of diminishing concentric circles, with the smallest, shrunk to the limit, again beginning to live its own independent life, to expand and push out the environment and to act on the periphery. Such was the life of the blueprint that I visualised, and only now am I trying to translate it into consciousness and words, but at the time it existed primarily in terms of music and muscles I am serious when I speak of muscular awareness, because at that time the whole movement and development of the poem was, for me, closely linked with the development of the muscular system. With systematic manual labour, the muscles develop first in the arms, the biceps, that is, and next-gradually-comes the finer, more subtle and rare network of muscles in the chest and in the back under the shoulder-blades.

This rhythmic and gradual growth of the muscles was to form the rhythm of the whole poem. The basic idea and theme are connected with this.

The theme is how the links of the same chain of a family develop The separate offspring of each family develop to their predestined limit and then are re-absorbed by the world environment; but in each offspring something new and something more urgent matures and is deposited at the cost of endless losses, personal tragedies, failures in life, lapses, etc; at the cost, finally, of those infinitely sublime lofty qualities which, in their time, shone like the finest diamonds in the human crown (such as the human qualities, the virtues, irreproachable honesty, high moral standards and so on)

In short, the world maëlstrom sucks down almost the whole of man into its vortex and not a trace is left of the personality, which, if it still exists, is disfigured and maimed beyond recognition. There was once a human being - but he is human no longer; all that is left is a useless, putrid lump of flesh and a rotting soul But the seed has been sown, and in the next first-born, something new grows that is more stubborn, and, in the last first-born, this acts perceptibly on the environment In this way, the family, which has fallen victim to the retribution of history, of the environment, of the epoch, begins in its turn to wreak retribution; the last first-born is now capable of hitting back and roaring like a lion; he is ready to reach out his hand for the wheel that moves the history of mankind. And he may even be successful .

What next? I don't know and I never have known; I can only say that this whole idea arose under the pressure of the steadily growing hatred that I felt for the various theories of progress

I wanted to embody such an idea in my own small-scale "Rougon-Macquarts", in a short chronicle of a Russian family living under the conditions of Russian life. *Two or three links, and you can see / Behests of dark antiquity...* Through catastrophes and lapses, my "Rougon-Macquarts" are gradually liberated from the éducation sentimentale of the Russian nobility. Carbon is transformed into diamond, Russia - into a new America; a new one, not the old America.

The poem was to consist of a prologue, three long chapters and an epilogue. Each chapter was framed in a description of world events; they were to be its background.

The first chapter unfolds in the 70s of the last century, against the background of the Russo-Turkish war and the Narodnaya Volya movement, in an enlightened liberal family. Into this milieu comes a "demon", the first swallow of "individualism", a man similar to Byron, with unworldly outbursts and aspirations, dulled, however, by the malaise of the times, the incipient *fin de siècle.*

The second chapter, the action of which unfolds at the end of the 19th century and the beginning of the 20th, was never written, except for the introduction, and was to be dedicated to the son of this "demon", the heir to his rebellious outbursts and distressing lapses - the unemotional son of our age. This is only one of the

links in this long family chain; of him also, apparently, nothing remains except a spark of fire flung into the world, a seed planted by him one passionate and sinful night in the womb of the quiet and maidenly daughter of an alien people.

The third chapter describes how the father ends his life: what becomes of the former brilliant "demon", into what an abyss this once brilliant man falls. The action of the poem moves from the Russian capital, where it has taken place so far, to Warsaw—seemingly the "back yard of Russia" at first, but then called, evidently, to play a Messianic role linked with the destiny of God-forsaken and anguished Poland. There, over the father's freshly-dug grave, there comes to an end the development and career of the son, who gives way to his own offspring, the third link in that same family with its soaring flights and its precipitate falls

The epilogue was to contain a portrait of an infant which is held and cradled in her lap by a simple mother, lost somewhere in the vast Polish clover fields. She is unknown to anyone and is herself completely ignorant But she cradles and suckles her son, and the son grows; he already begins to play, he begins to follow the words on the page with his finger and repeat after his mother: *And I shall go to meet the soldiers . And rush onto their bayonets... ·And in defence of you, my freedom, I shall ascend the scaffold steps*

That, it seems, is the circle of human life contracting to the minimum, the last link of the long chain, the circle which itself, in the end, will begin to expand and to press on the environment, on the periphery. This is the scion of the family who will perhaps, in the end, seize with his hand the wheel that moves human history.

The whole poem should be accompanied by a definite *leitmotiv* of "retribution". this leitmotiv is a *mazurka*, the dance which carried Marina on its wings as she dreamed of the Russian throne, and Kosciusko with his finger pointing to the heavens, and Mickiewicz at the Russian and Paris balls. In the first chapter, the strains of this dance float from the window of a Petersburg flat in the stagnant 70s; in the second chapter, the dance thunders out at a ball and blends with the jingling of officers' spurs, like the foam of *fin de siècle* champagne, the famous Veuve Clicquot*, then the even more stagnant gypsy, Apukhtin years; finally, in the third chapter, the mazurka comes into its own: it is heard in the blizzard sweeping over nocturnal Warsaw, over the snow-covered Polish clover fields. And in it can be heard the voice of Retribution.

12 July 1919

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* Veuve Clicquot (Fr)—a brand of Champagne named after the owner of the Firm that made it —*Ed*

Life has no end and no beginning.
Chance waits in ambush for us all.
Above us hangs a gloomy pall,
Or God's clear visage, ever-shining.
Artist, believe implicitly
In ends and in beginnings. Know
When heaven awaits, or hell below.
It is your lot dispassionately
To measure all that meets your gaze,
So let your look be firm and clear.
All the haphazard traits erase –
You'll see then that the world is fair.
They sense the dark who've seen the light
Let all things pass in time, and slowly –
What's sinful in this world, what's holy –
Through the mind's cold and spirit's heat.
Thus Siegfried hammers out his sword,
Beating it while it's still red hot,
Then cools it in the water vat,
And thereupon the trusty blade
Hisses, turns black and loses heat...
One blow – the trusty Nothung glitters,
The hypocrite dwarf Mime shudders
And throws himself at Siegfried's feet!

Who'll forge the blade? One wholly brave.
But I am helpless, weak and lost,
Like all, like you, a clever slave,
Compounded of mere clay and dust.
To me, this world is full of terror.
The hero cannot strike his fill,
His hand obeys the people's will.
Above all looms a fiery pillar,
And every heart, and every concept
Has its own licence, its own law...
Thirst-maddened and with gaping maw
A dragon hovers over Europe...
Who'll dare to strike the fatal
blow?
We do not know. Above our host,

As long ago, there hangs a mist
And reek of distant fires that glow...

But song shall always still be song,
And someone sings among the throng.
The dancer, at the Monarch's wish,
Serves him the Poet's head on a dish.
There, on the scaffold he must stand,
Condemned without repeal to swing;
Here, with an ugly name they brand
His poetry... And yet I sing.
Not the last judgement yours shall be,
You'll lay no finger on my lips!..
The church is empty, the pastor sleeps –
And yet, before the liturgy,
I'll walk across the dewy grass,
I'll turn the key and hear it grate;
Within, by the dawn's rosy light,
I'll celebrate my own high mass.

You that once smote the Morning Star,
Bless me upon this road I take!
Grant me permission just to turn
At least one small page of life's book.
Let me at leisure and with truth
Before your Countenance impart
What each one hides within his heart,
Tell what is living on this earth,
How, like a storm, the heart's wrath gathers.
Then youth and freedom ripen with it,
And each man breathes the people's spirit.
Sons are reflected in their fathers:
A fragment of a tribe, no more,
Two or three links, and you can see
Behests of dark antiquity:
A new breed pushes to the fore –
Carbon to diamond turns below.
Under the busy picks and shovels,
Reluctant risen from earth's bowels,
It goes before the world – on show!
Strike on, albeit with aching backs!
Though deep, deep down the rich vein runs,

From far away the diamond shines –
Wrathful iambics, smash those rocks!

CHAPTER ONE

Nineteenth century, iron century,
Indeed you were an age of doom!
You pitched heedless humanity
Into nocturnal, starless gloom!
A night of abstract speculation,
Minor materialistic matters,
Futile complaints and imprecations,
Anaemic souls and feeble bodies!
With you the plague went; but now all
Is neurasthenia, spleen, ennui;
Age of heads beaten on the wall
Of economic theory;
Age of congresses, federations,
Of stocks, and shares, and rents, and bonds,
Of long postprandial orations,
Of vague and ineffectual minds;
Age of the semi-gifted ones
(For half-and-half works out more fairly),
Of drawing-rooms, and not salons,
Not Récamiers, but ladies merely...
Age of the wealthy bourgeoisie,
(Evil unseen, but slowly growing),
Equality, fraternity –
Mere cover-names for evil-doing...
And man? He lost his liberty:
Machines and cities mattered more,
Never had "life" so painlessly
Destroyed the human soul before...
But he who was manipulating
The marionettes in every land,
Certainly knew his business, spreading
A humanistic fog all round:
Flesh wilted, spirit shone no more,
There, in that mist, putrescent, grey,
The angel of all holy war

Himself seemed to have flown away:
There, bloody feuds are found solution
By clever, skilled diplomacy;
There, new guns hinder confrontation
Face to face with the enemy;
Instead of courage – impudence,
Instead of heroism – psychosis;
Command's eternal arguments;
The lumbering wagon train advances,
Led by a crew that roundly scorn
The General Staff, supplies, the mud;
The bugle now – not Roland's horn,
Peaked cap – not helm upon the head...
It was much cursed, that century,
And will be cursed yet even more.
But how reduce its misery?
Sweet blossoms, but the fruits were sour....

Twentieth century... Now the gloom
Is still more wild and frightening
(Even more black and sweeping looms
The shade of Lucifer's vast wing).
The smoky, blazing fires of sunset
(Prophecies warning of our days),
The ominous and ghostly comet
Drawing its tail across the skies,
Messina's cruel destiny
(The elements can't be defied),
The harsh roar of machinery
Forging destruction day and night,
The dread awareness of illusion
In all one's thoughts, dreams and ideas,
Man's first flight in an airplane,
cruising
Into the void of unknown spheres...
For life itself, a deep revulsion,
Yet love that's not to be denied,
And, for the homeland, hate and passion...
Meanwhile, the black and earthly blood
Portends – making the arteries swell,
Destroying boundaries, more and more –
Changes without all parallel,
Rebellions never known before...

And Man? Beyond the steel's loud roar,
In flames and in the gunsmoke's haze,
What vistas of unending fire
Were thrown wide open to your gaze?
What do those clattering engines mean?
Why does the whirling airscrew whine
Through a mist, cold-and void as well?
Follow me, reader, if you will,
To the North's ailing capital city,
On the far-distant Finnish coast.

Autumn of Seventy-Eight's already
Drawing near to its end at last.
In Europe, work is going fine,
While here, the usual bleak, pale dawn
Stares at the marshlands dismally...
But halfway through September, see
How much the sun has shone this year!
Where have the crowds been bound since dawn?
All the way to the gates, a cheer
Rattles like peas upon a drum.
The Zabalkansky and Sennaya
Are packed with policemen and the crowd:
Oaths, jostling, voices rising higher...
And on the boundary's yonder side,
Where golden-domed there coruscates
The Novodevichi Convent, are
The fences, waste lots, abbattoirs
Before the city's Moscow Gates–
A wall of people, and a fleet
Of buggies, drozhkis and calashes,
With nodding plumes, and casques, and shakoes,
Tsarina, Court and all the élite!
Before the moved tsarina's eye
In autumn's sunshine, dusty, bland,
The seasoned troops are marching by,
Returning from an alien land...
They bear themselves as on parade;
Or did the impression not last long
Of the encampment near Tsargrad,*
The foreign cities, the foreign tongue?

* An ancient name for Constantinople.–*Ed*

They've left the Balkans under snow,
Three Plevnas, Shipka and Dubnyak,
Wounds not yet healed, a cunning foe
Who had the courage to fight back...
Pavlovites, Grenadiers go by
Along the dusty thoroughfare,
Their mien is grim, their chests are grey;
A George's Cross glints here and there.
Their ranks are noticeably thinner,
But those who battled and came through,
Now, under singed and tattered banners,
March along with their heads bent low.
So ended is a tough campaign:
Never-to-be-forgotten days!
They're on their native soil again!
They're back beneath their native skies!
But how will their own people greet them?
Let bygone times return no more.
As for the nightmare visions of war,
Let the cold breezes dissipate them!–
In the glad hour of their returning,
They have forgotten about it all:
A soldier's life and death, when storming
Through hail of enemy shot and shell,
Nights that for many brought no day,
The cold, unheeding firmament,
Death ever watching for its prey,
Proving triumphant in the end,
Disease, starvation, weariness,
Shot's whistle, whine of cannon ball,
The freezing trenches caked with ice,
The fires that gave no heat at all,
And even the endless hostile feelings
Between HQ and fighting men,
And (perhaps even worse than them)
The commissary's dirty dealings–
Or they've remembered, it may be.
The trays of bread and salt are ready,
There will be speeches presently,
While cigarettes and flowers already
Are raining down from upstairs rooms.
Sacred their cause, it must be said!
Look! Every soldier's bayonet

Is covered with a spray of blooms!
Commanders of battalions all
Have had their saddles decked with flowers,
More flowers in their buttonholes,
And flowers, between their horses' ears...

They keep on coming. By evening, all
Should reach their barracks; some to dress
Wounds with clean lint and cotton wool,
Others to parties, to impress
Beautiful girls, show off their crosses,
And speak with studied casualness,
Languidly twirling their moustaches
Before the much embarrassed braggart,
And toying with a new sword-knot
On a red band – like children, truly...
But are these army people really
So fascinating and so wise?
Why are they praised up to the skies,
Why trusted so implicitly?

Visions of war persistently
Haunt each of them by night and day.
On those once ordinary faces
Mysterious fires now seem to play.
An alien life has turned its pages
For them to look upon. Now they
Have been baptised by fire and deed.
Each in his narrative describes
How, ghost-like on a snow-white steed
Amid the enemy grenades,
Our own White General, unharmed,
Treated the shellfire as a joke;
How over Gorny Dubnyak climbed
A column of red flames and smoke;
How a dead man would not let go
Of his own regimental flag,
And how a colonel helped to tow
A field-piece up a mountain track;
How the tsar's horse jibbed with a neigh
At one poor bayonet-mangled mess;

How the tsar looked and turned away,
His handkerchief before his face;
Yes, they know hunger, hardship, pain
As any common soldier does...
Anyone back from a campaign
Has felt that chill run through him, knows
That fatal, bleak "*It's all the same*",
Whose special function is preparing
The future course of world events
Simply by never interfering...
Such people's usual response
Is nothing but a twisted half-smile...
The powers-that-be promote the erstwhile
Pawns with despatch to rooks or knights.

But we, dear reader, were not meant to
Count up the various knights and rooks.
We've been drawn will-nilly into
A milling crowd of rubbernecks.
The general mood of wild delight
Has driven thoughts of the past away.
Our eyes are dazzled by the light,
Our ears ring with a long *hurray*!
Carried away, a number of them
Raise the dust with civilian feet,
All alongside the marching column,
Like little urchins of the street.
And this emotional excess
In Petersburg's September damp!
Just look! Paterfamilias
Perched high on top of that street-lamp!
His wife has long been shouting, calling,
Quivering with fury and despair.
She pokes him sharply with her brolly,
She even prods him in the rear.
But this he likewise just ignores;
He sticks fast to his place like glue,
Oblivious of the loud guffaws.
The rascal's got the finest view!..
They've gone, save for the very last
Echoes. The crowds still hang around.
A water cart has driven past,

Leaving a wet trail on the ground.
A driver, as he rumbles round
A pedestal, knocks down a lady,
And people run up, shouting, ready
To lend a hand immediately
(A policeman's whistle shrills nearby)...
Now all the carriages are gone,
In barracks, it is past Tattoo,
The family man has clambered down,
It's time that he was going too.
All leave, but with expectancy...
Yes, on the day of their return,
City life, like the infantry,
Rumbles across the paving stones,
And on and on – lacking in grace,

But with a most impressive roar...
Something goes, something takes its place –
Look twice, things are the same no more,
The life that's past cannot return,
You're in it, as in times gone by...

A pale ray of the setting sun
Lingers upon a window high,
And if you looked, you might discern
The pale face of a man inside,
And notice there a certain sign
Whose meaning is, to you, denied.
You'll never glance up at that room,
And, if you met him, you would take
No notice, heading for the gloom
In the crowd's bustling, seething wake.
Stranger, pass by, and casually
Give your moustache a twirl or two.
The man, the building, let them be
No different from the rest – to you.
You have so much upon your mind,
It hardly bothers you at all
That your fate, too, is there, behind
The blankness of *that* very wall...
(But if you could imagine it,
Forgetting wife and samovar,

You'd drop your jaw in fright and sit
Down on the pavement as you are!).

Twilight. The blinds have been pulled down.
The room is full almost to bursting;
Behind closed doors, all are conversing
In voices muted, hushed in tone.
The conversation in that room
Suggests uneasiness and worry,
And no one seems in any hurry
To light the lamps, despite the gloom
In which all faces seem to drown.
Look closely, and you'll see a row
Of male and female ghosts, a line
Of faces that you do not know.
The company is not loquacious,
And, upon entering, each guest
With a glance hesitant and cautious
Looks round, as wary as a beast.
A cigarette begins to glow
More brightly where a woman's sitting,
The simple hair-style hardly hiding
The high and almost childlike brow;
A big, wide collar, spotless white,
An ordinary, plain black dress;
Slender, of less than average height,
With open, blue-eyed, candid face;
But fixed on something far away,
Intent and steady is her gaze;
Sadness combined with bravery
Burns in those friendly, gentle eyes.
Someone's expected... They hear the bell
pulled.
Slowly the door swings open: and there
A new guest stands upon the threshold:
Manly and self-assured his air,
And grave, you could say almost grand;
Dressed foreign-style from head to foot—
Exquisitely: in one gloved hand
He holds a shiny, tall top hat.
The faintest shadow of a cloud
Darkens the mild, yet stern brown eyes;

A neat imperial goatee beard
Fringes a mouth that's ill-at-ease:
The head is large, the hair is dark
Monster or beau? He's really both:
Traces of melancholy lurk
Around the twisted, troubled mouth.

The hubbub suddenly dies down...
Two words, two handshakes;
then the guest
Goes to her in the plain black gown,
Simply by-passing all the rest...
He looks with real affection on her,
Pressing her hand with fervent grip,
And says, "Congratulations, Sonya,
Sofia Lvovna, on your escape!
Back to the deadly struggle now!"
For no apparent reason why,
Upon her strangely pallid brow
Two furrows deepen suddenly...

Nightfall. The menfolk in the room
Pour wine and rum into a bowl,
And when the vessel's brimming full,
Beneath it runs a light blue flame.
Crossed daggers then are laid on top,
The flame grows bigger, starts to rise
Over the punch and then shoots up,
Quivering before the onlookers' eyes...
Fire, wrestling with the outer dark,
Casts a glow of pale lilac hue;
An old song of the Haidamaks
Rings out, harmonious and true.
It's like a wedding or housewarming,
As if there were no coming storm,
Such childlike happiness is shining
In eyes habitually stern...

The old is followed by the new,
Colourful images flit past.
Don't miss your chances, artist; you

For recompense - tranquillity,
And a late noble-mindedness
(Nor had it quite the pointlessness
Now foisted on it everywhere,
When in most families, the door
Is open to the winter snows
And any husband's always game
To be unfaithful to his spouse
Without even the slightest qualm).
Here, *nihilism* was not thought vicious,
Here, too, the natural sciences
(That so alarmed the authorities)
In spirit seemed almost religious.
"But family life is such a bore!"
They loved to say, affecting anger;
Yet it was all just as before –
"The Princess Marya Alexevna"...
The living memory of the past
And unbelief went side by side,
For hours on end, people discussed
The "dual faith" – a recent fad.
They had their own vocabulary,
Of all things foreign they were chary,
When not quite openly alarmed.
Meanwhile, the whole of life was
changing,
There was upheaval everywhere,
The new, like a fresh wind free-ranging,
Troubled that friendly atmosphere:
A nihilist in peasant blouse
Demanding vodka on the house
Just to upset the family
(His civic duty, argued he!),
Or maybe a high-ranking guest
Would run in, far from self-possessed,
A "People's Will" clutched in his hand,
In need of help to understand
What was behind the anarchy,
How meet the "anniversary",
And how knock some hard sense into
The young who'd raised this hullabaloo.
Each knows that in this house he'll find
True warmth and human understanding;

A light, magnanimous and kind,
Illumines everything around him...

The old are nearing their decline
(Though you may long for noon again,
You can't arrest, even for a time,
The blue mist surging from the plain.)
The family head, a man of action
Back in the Forties, to this day
Is one of the progressives, guarding
The shrines of civil liberty.
Since the harsh times of Nicholas,
He's stood for wider education,
But lately the new movement has
Caused him somehow to lose direction...
Turgenev's equanimity
Is really much more in his line.
He's a true connoisseur of wine,
In food, he values subtlety.
The French tongue and the capital
He treasures maybe most of all
(But then, all Europeans do:
The Germans dream of Paris, too).
A "Westerniser", still he is
A Russian nobleman at heart;
French notions, for the greater part,
Are not compatible with this;
When at Borel's place, dining out,
He grumbles no less than Shchedrin:
The chef has underdone the trout,
Or the fish soup is over-thin.
Fate's law of iron has decreed,
Like a flower on a canyon side,
Unsought-for domesticity...

There are in this good family
Three daughters: one forever mooning,
Dreaming about her future spouse;
The second's very keen on learning,
The smallest skips around the house;
Of lively, cheerful disposition,

She teases all her chums at school,
And with a flaming red hair ribbon
Drives the headmistress up the wall...
Time passes: they're invited out,
They ride to balls by horse and carriage;
Somebody's loitering about,
The youngest one's been sent a message
By a smart officer cadet–
The first tears flow so pleasantly.
Her sister, shy, prim and correct,
Is suddenly proposed to by
A tousle-haired idealist.
Soon it will be her wedding day...
"He doesn't love her in the least–"
Her father scowls and growls away:
"He simply isn't one of us..."
The mother, too, is no less sure,
But hides from him, as he from her,
All traces of possessiveness.
She speeds up work on the trousseau;
The dowry's sewn with undue haste,
And to this ritual of woe
Friends, relatives arrive as guests...
Ritual this groom eschews,
(Seeing "the people suffer so")
The bride holds just those very views,
So hand-in-hand with him she'll go,
That the fair ray of light be shed,
And pierce the dark to some avail
(But wouldn't dream of being wed
Without orange blossom and a veil).
His thoughts turned to a civic wedding,
Black as September skies his brow,
Unkempt, his suit creased and ill-fitting,
The bridegroom's at the altar now,
He's marrying "on principle",
This paragon of all that's new.
The priest, an ageing liberal,
Blesses them with a shaky hand,
He doesn't understand the meaning
Of what he says, nor does the groom. .
As for his bride beside him, soon
She feels quite faint, her head is spinning,

Upon her cheeks two red spots blaze
And teardrops slowly fill her eyes.

The awkward stage is sure to pass...
They'll join the family again;
Thanks to domestic cosiness,
Life, as before, will be the same.
No, it will be a long time yet
Before that healthy back is bent,
Before, after wild argument
With his young friends night after night,
He comes out with his conscience clear,
His dreams dreamt on the straw... A room
Will be allotted to them there
In that most hospitable home.
The house itself, it may well be,
Won't like this break in the routine:
They're glad he's joined the family.
In due course, things will settle down:
The youngest girl is bound to tease
The bride for being a confirmed
Narodnitsa and hard to please;
The second sister, will protest,
Stating her case quite reasonably.
The oldest, head on husband's chest,
Will sweetly dream the hours away.
The groom will spend much time in vain
With his wife's father in debate
On socialism and the commune
And how the insult "reprobate"
Should be applied at once to someone
For making a denunciation...
They'll go on seeking a solution
For the "accursed and painful question"...

Life's river, breaking up the ice
In spring, won't sweep them out of view:
No, it will leave them both in peace,
The younger man, the old one too—
To watch the ice crack up, career
Along to imminent destruction.

Both will imagine they can hear
The "people calling them to action"...
These childish fancies won't, however,
Stop him acquiring the correct
Veneer of suitable behaviour
(To this, the father won't object),
Wearing a jacket, not a blouse,
And working in the State's employ,
Siring a bouncing baby boy,
Loving his lawful wedded spouse,
And, in a job that brings no "glory",
Doing his duty really well,
The perfect civil functionary
Not interested in bribes at all.
All life's ahead; death's far away:
Like small boys always on the go
Till Mother calls – they'll frisk and play;
They're not my kind of people,
though;
All they can do is read, converse,
And cheer themselves with fantasies;
But they will never understand
The people with the *tragic eyes*,
Not like the ones discussed above –
Theirs is another (pathetic) love...

Such was life in the family,
The wavelets lulled them. The river flowed,
By spring floods swollen, dark and wide;
The ice-floes loomed up ominously,
Paused, and then unexpectedly
Sailed swiftly round this ancient barque.
But soon through the cold mists was heard
The tolling of the hour: a dark,
Mysterious stranger now appeared.

Rise, cross the meadows in the morning:
The hawk wheels in the paling sky,
In circle after circle turning
And on the watch, eager to spy
A nest ill-hidden in the bushes.

Suddenly – twittering and movement.
He listens... waits for one brief moment,
Then down with folded wings he plunges...
Commotion in the nests nearby;
The fledgelings twitter desperately.
A gentle down floats on the breeze –
He tears the victim with his claws...
Then, great wings flapping, up he flies
To wheel in circles smooth and slow,
And watch with fierce and hungry eyes
The empty meadow down below...
Look where you will, he turns and turns...

So Mother Russia, bird-like, mourns
Her young; but it's her destiny
That hawks shall maul them cruelly.

The soirées held by Anna Vrevsky
Skimmed off society's choicest cream.
There, the sad, ailing Dostoyevsky
In his declining years was seen
Relaxing from life's heavy load
And gathering items to enhance
His *Diary*. (He then enjoyed
Pobedonostsev's confidence).
His hand outstretched in inspiration,
Polonsky read his poetry there,
And some ex-minister, with contrition,
Confessed his sins for all to hear.
The university's own rector,
Came too, the botanist Beketov,
Professors. multitudes of them,
And servants of the brush and pen,
Servants of tsarist power too,
Partly its foes as well, it's true.
There represented you could see
All sections of society.
There, without worry or alarm,
Softened by their hostess's charm,
Could Liberal and Slavophile
Exchange a handshake and a smile

(A custom that, since times long past,
Orthodox Russia's never lost:
A warm handshake for everyone).
Not so much with her conversation
As with her bright-eyed animation,
The hostess worked her spell upon
Those there in minutes, little more.
She was so rightly held to be
Beautiful quite beyond compare,
Yet good and kind of heart was she;
Whoever knew her in some way
Was hardly likely to forget
Her kindness (writers must not say
A great deal on this matter yet).
By free and open invitation,
Many young people showed up there;
Some were of similar persuasion,
This one might be in love with her,
That one in some conspiracy...
All needed her without exception,
All came to her; courageously
She offered her participation
In all the mainly harmless questions,
As in more risky operations...
To her were taken all the three
Young girls from my own family.

Among the elders held in awe,
Among the youngsters green and raw,
In that distinguished drawing-room
One youthful savant seemed at home,
On friendly terms with nearly all,
He was a much accepted guest:
Something about his face impressed
The others as unusual.
Once, as he happened to walk through,
His face caught Dostoyevsky's eye.
Turning to her–"Who is that beau?"
He asked his hostess quietly.
"He looks like Byron." This observation
Went round the whole room in a trice,
And all looked with renewed attention

At the strange, unfamiliar face.
For once, society was kind
That with such ease is rarely swayed.
"Handsome, brainy," the ladies said.
"A poet," the men remarked, and frowned.
It may be envy, common failing,
When all the menfolk knit their brows...
But what the fair sex may be feeling,
Only the very Devil knows...
The ladies were in ecstasies:
"Byron? A demon, then, my dear..."
He looked just like that English peer,
The same hauteur writ on the face,
And something I would like to call
The weight of melancholy's fire.
(His strangeness was observed by all,
But no one minded, just the same).
However, in his make-up, sadly,
The other's *will* just wasn't there...
In the strange, hidden passions only
With that famed lord could he compare:
Belated scion of generations
In which burned the rebellious flame
Of wild, unworldly aspirations,
He was like Byron in the same
Way that a sickly brother so
Resembles the more healthy one:
There is the same clear, ruddy glow,
The masterful expression on
The face, the craving for the abyss,
But with the inner self bewitched
By cold and morbid weariness,
With action's fire completely quenched
And the will's mad, demonic strivings
Weighed down by consciousness.
The way—
A bird of prey will roll its eye
And slowly stretch its ailing pinions.

"How fascinating and how clever!"—
The youngest daughter's exclamation
Echoed the chorus. Small objection

From father. He was invited over,
Our Byron of the new complexion,
And he took up the invitation.

A long lost kinsman from afar–
That's how they treated him. At first,
In the old house by the Neva,
He was like any other guest,
But soon the old folks were entranced
By manners of the old-fashioned kind,
His conduct was polite, restrained,
Although broad-minded and advanced
Was the new lord in his convictions;
But he was always courteous, and
He'd stoop to kiss a lady's hand
Without a trace of condescension.
Because he had a brilliant mind,
His contradictions were dismissed
By people naturally kind,
Though there were more than could be missed;
They were obscured by talent's brilliance,
A sort of glitter in the eye...
(You hear the flap of upstretched pinions?
The predator seeks out its prey...)
But at that time, his boyish smile
Was something that could only please
All who encountered him. Meanwhile,
He could still take things at his ease,
Of his own dark side unaware...

Informally with them he dined,
Enchanting everybody there
With his inspired and unconstrained
Discourse. (Though the Law was his trade,
He could quote poetry with an air:
Constant in him reigned side by side
With Pushkin, Stein went with Flaubert).
Liberty, rights, ideals he rated
As values not to be denied;
The strangeness lurked deep down inside:
For, while maintaining, he negated,

(To wild extremes his mind would stray,
And yet, somehow, the Golden Mean
Never quite seemed to come his way!).
There were times when he tried to cover
All the most loathsome things with love,
As if to drench a cold cadaver
With blood, red, pulsing and alive...
"Talent!" you'd hear all round the room,
But, without pride (yet not at all
Contrite), he'd yield to sudden gloom...
Ailing, and yet still young, the soul,
Fearing itself (and with good cause)
Sought solace: words immediately
Became wholly superfluous...
(Oh, dust of words! What need have we
Of you!–You're powerless to console
Or help us in our agonies!)–
Two hands would masterfully fall
On the submissive piano keys,
Plucking the sounds, like random flowers,
Crazily, daringly and boldly,
Like scraps of feminine attire
From the already yielding body...
A lock of hair would tumble down...
He'd tremble in mysterious fashion...
(Even as on the bed, when passion
Will merge two beings into one...)
And there, beyond the music's storm,
Would suddenly arise (as then)
An image, sweet, remote, forlorn,
And far beyond all human ken...
And white wings in an azure sky,
And silence, not of earth and eerie–
But this more tranquil melody
Would vanish in the music's fury.

What happened next? All as was fated:
Handshakes and words exchanged all round,
And eyes most bashfully cast down...
Future was only separated
From Past by just the faintest line...

He seemed one of the family.
His good looks stole, in little time,
The youngest daughter's heart away.
A kingdom that he did not own
He promised her. And she went pale,
Believing him... He turned her home
Into the semblance of a goal
(Though there was nothing in that house
Suggestive of the prison world...)
But what had been so warm and nice,
Was now unfriendly, desolate, wild –
Under the captivating charm
Of talk that promised something new,
Under the hard, demonic flame
Of eyes that pierced her through and through.
He was the elements, life and joy,
The hero of all time to her.
Her relatives and family
Did all they could to interfere,
But merely fuelled her agitation...
She did not seem to understand
That things were now beyond flirtation.
She almost went out of her mind...
And he?
He saw fit to delay,
Although he did not know the cause.
He was indeed not led astray
By his demonic inner force.
My hero was sophisticated,
Too perspicacious not to guess
That the poor child was much tormented
And that to give her happiness
Was now entirely in his power...
No, no... But there began to fade
The flames of passion's former fire,
A voice was softly whispering: "Wait..."
It was the cold and ruthless mind
That wanted to assert its own,
The intuition that divined
The anguish of life lived alone...
"No, it's not love, he's only playing,"
She railed against her destiny.
"Why does he keep on terrifying

Someone as weak and frail as me?..
He can't go on like this much longer
As if there were some other thing..."
(The bird of prey is growing stronger
Soon it will stretch its ailing wings
And swoop down on the silent meadow
To drain the blood out of the live,
Crazed victim, terror-struck already
And palpitating...) Such was love
All through that vampire century,
Which could corrupt and maim beyond
All semblance of humanity.

You wretched age, be three times damned!

In such a plight, another suitor
Would soon have had the sense to leave her,
My hero, with his sense of duty,
Was quite unable to deceive her:
His strangeness gave no pleasure to him,
And he should long ago have known
That playing Demon and Don Juan
Made him a figure of pure fun.
He knew a lot – to his own sorrow,
With reason passing for a "freak"
In the harmonious human chorus
We often call (that's when we speak
Among ourselves) "the common herd".
And yet, "Vox populi, vox dei"
Is what more often should be heard,
Even if only just today:
Had he been but a shade more dense
(Hardly his fault, it must be said),
She might have had the common sense
To settle for a better road;
Also, by linking, it may be,
His callous and rebellious fate
With such demure gentility,
My hero was by no means right...

But things went irresistibly
Upon their way. The rustling leaf

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Spun down. And unavoidably
Age told upon the house's life.
Talks on the Balkans took their course,
Conducted by diplomatists;
Troops came and slept beneath the stars,
And the Neva was wrapped in mists.
Home business was attended to,
And then there were home problems too:
Arrests, house searches, denunciations,
Countless hoped-for assassinations...
My Byron lived as a confirmed
Bookworm all through those dismal days,
Wrote a most brilliant thesis and
So earned himself unstinted praise,
Then a professor's chair in Warsaw...
Preparing lectures diligently,
Deeply immersed in Civil Law,
But growing wearier within,
He asked if she would marry him,
And, joining two fates into one,
He took her far away from home;
(Already growing deeply bored,)
Insisting that his young wife shared
His studies with him till the dawn...

Two years went by. A bomb was hurled,
And from the Catherine Canal
It covered Russia with a pall
Of cloud. The signs had all foretold
That doom was not so far away,
And Fate would play it's card – the worst.
And so the era's last clear day
Came to be known as *March the First.*

The family grieves. It is as though
The most important part is lost:
The youngest, who amused them so,
Has left, and she is badly missed.
Life's become more confused, and harder:
Smoke covers Russia day and night,
The father broods, hair turning white...

Boredom! Scant news comes from the daughter...
Suddenly, she's back home again...
What's wrong with her? For, while away,
She's become haggard, pale and wan...
In her arms lies a baby boy.

CHAPTER TWO

(Introduction)

I

In those far-off years of stagnation,
All hearts were filled with sleep and gloom:
Pobedonostsev over Russia
Had spread the owl-like wings of doom,
And there was neither day nor night–
Only the shadow of vast wings;
He drew a magic circle right
Round all of Russia, riveting
Her with his wizard's glassy stare;
Lulled by a well-told fairy-tale,
Beauty feels drowsy in a while;
And so a mist crept over her;
She slept hopes, passions, thoughts away,
But even under that grim charm
The glow upon her cheeks was warm,
And though in the magician's sway,
She seemed full of vitality
That was, as by an iron fist,
Into a useless ball compressed...
With one hand, slowly, rhythmically
The wizard swung the censer, and
Up coiled the blue smoke in a cloud,
But with the other bony hand
He thrust live souls under a shroud.

II

Those years are now long past recalling:
Petersburg was more menacing still,

Although the river went on rolling,
Neither more sluggish nor more dull
Beneath the fortress walls, in silence.
Bayonets flashed, carillons wept,
The same beaux and their girl-friends kept
On racing over to the islands,
And horse, another horse approaching,
Snickered a scarcely heard reply.
The black mustache, on furs encroaching,
Tickled red lips, and cheek, and eye...
As I remember it, I too
Sped there with you as in a fever...
No harm in that, my dear, it's true,
But not much joy came of it either...

III

A mere glow was the terrible
Dawn of the Orient then, no more...
In Petersburg, the teeming rabble
Gapes in servility at the tsar...
There is, indeed, a milling crowd:
Bemedalled driver at the doors,
Stinging to life each heavy horse,
Police on the paving stones outside
Pushing the public back... "Hurray!"
A powerful voice is heard to bawl,
The tsar, enormous, dropsical,
Departs with all his family...
It's spring, but there's an early sun,
Easter is seven whole weeks away,
But from a roof quite suddenly
A drop of water falls, to run
Right down my neck and chill my spine...
Wind, wind, whichever way you turn...
"How sickening is this life," you groan,
Avoiding a puddle just in time.
Under your feet cringes a cur,
Galoshes shine – they are a sleuth's –
The courtyards stink of something sour,
A Tatar "prince" shouts "Clothes! Old clothes!"

And, meeting a chance passer-by,
You'd spit at him without compunction.
Did you not read the same intention
Writ clearly in the other's eye...

IV

Before the nights of May began,
The city's slumbers were profound,
The skyline widened all around;
Behind, a round, enormous moon
Mysteriously rouged its face
Before the great dawn's roseate beauty..
Oh, my strange and elusive city,
Why were you born above the abyss?..
Remember – one White Night you went
To where the Sphinx looks out to sea,
And there your troubled head you leaned
Against the granite wearily.
Far out at sea you seemed to hear
A strange, mysterious commotion,
Impossible in the Lord's creation
And, for our world, exceeding rare...
And you could see both far and wide,
Like the angel on the fortress spire.
(Was it a dream?) A fleet out there,
Its wings outspread on either side;
Himself the Mighty Founder stood
Upon the frigate in the lead...
Such waking dreams many have known...
But, Russia, do you know what dreams,
What storms fate has in store for you?
Yet, in the bleak and stagnant times
Not everyone had dreams, it's true...
During that wondrous spell, soon over,
The townsfolk were not on the square
(Only one much belated lover
With upturned collar sped somewhere)...
Already day-to-be was glowing
Bright in the streaming crimson wakes
Left by the ships; the breeze was toying

With the long pennants and the flags.
Spreading beyond the range of vision,
The glow of dawn was grim and gory –
Threat of Port Arthur and Tsushima,
Threat of the Ninth of January.

CHAPTER THREE

The father in Rose Avenue*
Struggles with weariness no more;
A train conveys the son into
The frosts, far from his native shore...
Lanterns, gendarmes, the railway line,
The Yiddish language and old-fashioned
Side curls; now, in a sickly dawn,
Poland, the old back-yard of Russia...
Fantasies of revenge imbue
All that is past and present here;
Copernicus plots vengeance too,
Bending above his hollow sphere...
Revenge! Revenge! For all to hear
The cast-iron chimes boom over Warsaw,
While Pan Frost clinks a bloody spur,
Mounted upon his vicious courser.
It's thawing now: a sluggish yellow
Brightens the far rim of the skies;
Flattery and affection mellow
The light in Polish maidens' eyes...
On earth and in the heavens – all
Is filled, just as before, with sadness,
Save for the line to Europe – steel
Honestly gleaming through the darkness...

A filthy station; houses all
Left at the mercy of the snows;
Bridge on the Vistula like a goal;
The father's felled by cruel disease –

* a street in Warsaw. – *Ed*

All's new to fate's most favoured one;
Even in this unkind world, he
Dreams of a miracle to be:
He wants to see bread come from stone,
Deathlessness on the death-bed omened,
And in the lamplight, yellow, dim,
Your radiant dawn is glimpsed by him,
O Lord, that hast forgotten Poland:
What does he want with youth now lost?
What does he yearn to ask the wind?
That wind bears nothing but dry dust
And autumn leaves long out of mind.
But night comes, brings the freezing cold,
And with it tiredness, somnolence...
How nauseating these street names!
At last–"Rose Avenue" it's called!..
A moment that will live forever:
The hospital has long been sound
Asleep, but vividly outlined
In a bright window stands his father,
Talking to someone. The son, stock-still,
Can hardly dare believe his eyes...
As if in some vague dream, the soul
Were stunned by eerie fantasies.
He can't shake off his evil thoughts:
"He's still alive!.. In alien Warsaw
Together we'll have chats on Law
And criticise the advocates!.."
It takes a minute's time, that's all:
The son looks quickly for the gates
(The hospital is closed at night).
Determinedly, he rings the bell
And goes inside. The staircase is
Ancient and creaky. Travel-stained
And weary, up the stairs he races,
Free of all pity or constraint...
A candle glimmers... Now a man
Is standing firmly in his way,
And says, peering suspiciously:
"You're the Professor's son?"
"I am..."
Then (in a friendlier voice this time):
"He died at five. Please step this way."

His father lay there, stiff and dry.
The once straight nose was aquiline.
The coffin's rumpled bedding was
Pathetic; in that strange, cramped room,
The corpse, prepared for visitors,
Was silent, yellow-faced, serene...
"Now he'll find peace of mind for sure,"
The son thought to himself as,
calmly,
He looked in at the open door...
(Somebody stayed beside him firmly,
Where the pale flames of candles quivered
And shed their wavering light all over
Thin shoulders, slippers, yellow face
Then, straightening up, on to the wall
Faintly projected other shadows...
But night, night hovers in the window...)
The son thinks: "And Death's festival?
So strangely calm my father's face.
Where are thought's wounds,
the lines of care,
Of passion, boredom and despair?
Has Death not left the slightest trace?"
But all are weary. The dead man
Can sleep alone. There's no disturbance–
The family's gone. Only the son
Stoops over, stealthy as a robber.
He wants with reverent care to slide
The ring from off the stiffened hand...
(It takes experience to unbend
The rigid fingers of the dead).
But when he's down upon his knees,
His head above and very close
To the cadaver's chest, he sees
What kind of shadows mar that face...
When the ring slips from stubborn fingers
Into the coffin's depths below,
The son crosses his father's brow,
Reading on it the mark of wanderers
Hounded about this world by Fate...
Straightens the candles, icon, hands,
Gives the hunched shoulders one more glance,
Says "God be with you" and goes out.

...es, the son loved his father then
For the first, and, maybe, last time,
Through liturgy and requiem,
Through human folly without end.
As he lay there, the father looked
Almost untidy; a lock of hair
Stood up; the eye in secret fear
Widened, the nose became more hooke[d]
A sad, pathetic smile distorted
Lips very slightly held apart;
But beauty conquered dissolution
In a way words cannot impart...
This beauty somehow gave the impressio[n]
That he'd at last forgotten all
Old wrongs, amused by the commotion
Of the alien army funeral.
The rabble did the best they could:
Made flowery speeches, honoured, praised,
With flowers one of the women strewed
His shoulders, that were slightly raised
A lead strip, seal on contradiction,
Upon the coffin's rim was laid
(Lest he should rise at Resurrection).
And then, in sorrow unalloyed,
From that impersonal church door,
They bore the coffin, crowded tight..
Outside, a snowless blizzard roared;
Evil day turned to evil night.

By unfamiliar streets and squares
Into the fields outside the city
All walked behind the funeral hearse...
It was the "Freedom" cemetery.
Oh, yes! A freedom song hear we
When the gravedigger bangs his spade
Down on the yellow clods of clay;
When prison doors are opened wide;
When we deceive our wives, and are
Deceived by them; when we hear news
Of someone's human rights abused,
And curse the ministers and the law
From flats with front doors locked securely;

When income gained from capital
Releases from the loftier goal;
When... Peace reigned in the cemetery,
A tang of freedom filled the air:
The dismal rites drew to a close,
The joyful cawing of the crows
Merged with the church chimes loud and clear...
Empty though some hearts may have been,
All mourned this wasted life... Above,
Even the sun looked briefly down
Into the father's humble grave.

The son looked too, in hope of finding
Something in that drear hole at least,
But things all swam before him, blinding
His vision, tightening his chest...
Three days – they'd seemed to last forever!
He felt his blood freeze suddenly...
Human vulgarity. Or the weather?
Or was it filial love, maybe?
The child's first memories were not clear,
But there had lingered in the son
Associations hard to bear –
His father he had never known.
They only met haphazardly.
They lived apart, in different towns.
Strangers in all respects were they
(Except in the most secret ones).
The father paid his calls more like
A guest. Round-shouldered. Big red circles
Around his eyes. Calmly he spoke,
Bringing a note of strange surmise
His cynical, oppressive mind
Evoked despair and sour emotions,
Staining the cloudy, complex notions
To which the young man was inclined...

Save that a glow of admiration
Would glimmer in the father's eyes,
Bringing a note of strange surmise
Into the tedious conversation...

The scene's the nursery: his father
Smokes on the sofa, cross and peevish,
The son spins like a dancing dervish,
Working himself into a lather;
Suddenly (wicked, foolish boy!),
As if an imp were riding him,
He stabs his father with a pin
Close to the elbow–violently...
Startled, white as a sheet with pain,
His father screams... And very clearly
That scream comes back to him again,
Here, in the "Freedom" cemetery.
The son comes to... The snowstorm whistles
Mourners; spade levelling off the mound.
The dead brown leafage stirs and rustles
A woman sobs; her grief's profound,
But there's a feeling of release...
Nobody knows her there. Her face
Is covered with a veil of mourning.
Is there a heavenly beauty shining
Behind it? Or does it hide from sight
The features of an ugly crone,
With teardrops trickling slowly down
Cheeks gouged by time's relentless flight?
Was it not she in hospital
Who watched the coffin with the son?..
But see, her face still veiled, she's gone...
The mourners here are strangers all.
Pity is all the son can feel:
He *too* from quite an early age
Received Flaubert's strange heritage,
L'Education sentimentale.

The son's escaped from liturgy
And requiem; but goes into
His father's house; we'll enter too
And there we'll cast a farewell eye
Upon the father's life (that bards
Should not attempt to praise the world!)
The son goes in. The rooms are void,
Dismal, and dark, and damp, and cold...
They used to think the father plainly

A crank – and not without foundation;
Everything there bore testimony
To his unhappy disposition.
He was professor, likewise dean,
Had real distinctions to his name,
In a cheap restaurant he'd dine,
He kept no servants in his home,
Loped along sideways down the street,
Hurrying like a starving dog,
In a fur coat that wasn't fit
To wear, its collar just a rag;
He'd been seen sitting on a pile
Of blackened railway sleepers; there
He often rested for a while,
His eyes fixed in a dead, blank stare
Upon the past. He nullified
All in this life that we hold dear;
For years he never even tried
To tidy up his wretched lair;
On piles of books, on furniture
The dust had settled in grey layers.
He sat, wrapped in his fur coat there,
And did not light the stove for years.
He saved a pile of rubbish, loath
To throw things out: old scraps of cloth,
Writing pens, crusts of stale bread, dockets,
Innumerable cigarette packets,
A mountain of unlaundered linen,
Letters sent by his family
Or ladies, portraits, and things that I
Would rather not be asked to mention...
To end the inventory – Warsaw's
Sparse light fell upon icon-cases,
Business agenda and reports
Of "morally uplifting chats"...
Coming to terms with life and fate,
This Faust, this erstwhile radical,
Spurning youth's fire, swung to the right,
Weakened, and then forgot it *all*;
Life's one-time blaze was now all smoke,
And indistinguishable now
Were the words "liberty" and "Jew"...
Music alone could reawake

A dream gone ineffectual:
The spluttering diatribes would stop
Rubbish was changed, turned beautiful
The stooping shoulders straightened .
The piano sang with startling power.
Blending in magic harmony
Shame, grief, a strangely radiant sorrow
Curses on passion and ennui...
But in the end, by his own will,
Cruel consumption struck him down.
He went to a third-rate hospital,
This twentieth-century Harpagon...

And so he lived: a crank, forgotten
By people, God, himself as well,
A dog, homeless and downtrodden
Amid the city's bustling hell.
But he... There were times when he knew
A never-to-be-forgotten power;
A melancholy genius flew
Sometimes into the black despair,
Grief and depression of his soul;
His restless and embittered hands
Brought Schumann back to life in sound,
And then his blood ran hot and cold. .
Perhaps in the dark fantasies
Of his blind soul, in the dark night,
There lurked a memory of huge eyes,
Wings smashed upon a mountain height.
He, in whom such a memory
Glimmers, can never be as others;
Throughout his life, he's in the sway
Of the true poet's divine afflatus;
He can be deaf, and dumb, and blind –
In him dwells a divinity;
By that same Demon he is drained
Who took all Vrubel's strength away...
His insights are profound, sublime,
ut shadowed by the gloom of night;
cruel and cold dream after dream
e keeps on seeing *Woe from Wit.*

Russia, with wrongs inflicted on her,
With violence rampant all around,
Angel-like, lets her wings droop down,
Woman-like, sheds all signs of shame.
The genius of the people, speechless,
To raise its voice unduly loth,
Takes to the fields, and all are powerless
To shed the burden of their sloth;
Save for a mother who bewails
Her son who's joined the country's foes,
Whom his own father so reviles
(The old have nothing left to lose!..)
As for the renegade, he's safe;
He's with the enemy, drinking wine;
The wind beats on the window-pane,
Calling to conscience and to life...

Warsaw, were you not likewise – proud
And noble capital of the Poles –
Forced into torpor by a horde
Of Russian army rogues and fools?
Life lurks deep in the underground,
The magnates' palaces are quiet,
Only Pan Frost is running riot,
On the rampage throughout the land!
His head of wild and tangled hair
Above us in a frenzy rises,
Or flowing sleeves high in the air
Unleash a storm above the houses;
Or the steed snorts – the telegraph wire
Hums like a taut string in reply;
Or Pan Frost reins back frenziedly,
And faithfully the cold cast iron
Repeats the blows of frozen hooves
Over the bleak, deserted road...
And once again, with drooping head,
Pan Frost falls silent, mopes and grieves...
But now he clinks a bloody spur,
Mounted upon his vicious charger.
Revenge! Revenge! For all to hear,
The cold cast iron booms over Warsaw!

Café and bar lights are still shining.
The "Nowy Swiat" does trade in bodi
The shameless pavements are still teemi
But there's no life now in the side-stre
Just darkness and the howling storm
Heaven takes pity: snow, soft and whi
Muffles life's mad and grinding flight.
And works its own especial charm.
It whirls and eddies, settling, rustling.
It is primaeval, gentle, timeless. .
My hero, kind of heart and blameless.
You too the powdery snow is dusting.
While, with your father just interred.
Unhappily and aimlessly,
You wander, wander endlessly
Among the sick and lecherous crowd
He has no feelings, thoughts, ideas,
His eyes are blank, there is no gleam.
His wanderings, so it might seem.
Have aged his heart by ten long years
The street lamp sheds its timid rays,
A figure on the corner then
Accosts him in a flattering voice,
See, she accosts and flatters him,
And he is straightaway oppressed
By a despair acute, profound,
As if a heavy hand had pressed
Him down and forced him to the ground...
He is no longer solitary,
As if someone were with him now;
The Cracow Quarter takes him fairly
Quickly to what lies down below–
The Vistula's snow-blasted hell...
So, taking refuge behind the houses,
Teeth chattering, he soon retraces
His steps and heads off back uphill...
Copernicus again, with sphere,
Under the snow immersed in thought..
(Beside our hero goes despair,
As friend or foe...) He now turns right
And walks some way up the steep hill...
His eye's attracted for a brief
While by the Orthodox cathedral...

(Some very high-and-mighty thief
Built it, but left it incomplete...)
My hero, meanwhile, put on speed,
But once again was overtaken
By weariness; his frame was shaken
By an acute fit of the shivers
(That mingled agonisingly
Fatigue, and cold, and misery...)
For hours he must have wandered over
The impassable, foot-clogging snows,
With neither sleep, nor rest, nor aim...
The blizzard's howl died down again,
Warsaw fell into sweet repose...
Where else did he have left to go?
He could not wander round all night–
No one was there to help him now!
It was already far too late!
Oh, black your gaze, nocturnal darkness,
And the stone heart is cold and numb,
Devoid of pity, deaf and dumb,
Like all the stone, unseeing houses!..
Only the snow, white, everlasting,
In winter falls upon the square,
The cold, dead body lightly dusting,
In spring, makes runnels everywhere...
But now my hero's state of mind
Is very near delirium...
He walks on... (And he leaves a trail,
But there are two of them, not one...)
There's a vague ringing in his ears...
Then endless railings suddenly–
The Saxon Gardens, it appears...
He leans against them wearily.

When you feel hounded and depressed
By people, cares or inner gloom;
When all that thrilled you lies at rest
Down in the darkness of the tomb;
When through the city's wilderness,
Eyelashes caked with clinging rime,
In body's and in mind's distress,
You slowly make your way back home–

Just pause, no matter where you are,
Listen to night's tranquillity;
Sounds of a life come to your ear
That you have never heard by day;
You look as if with second vision
At snowy vistas, bonfires, smoke,
Night waiting for the dawn to break
Above the pale, hoar-frosted garden,
And, book 'midst books, the boundless
In your sick soul again you'll find
A mother's image, head inclined,
And at that moment, suddenly,
The patterns on the street lamp's pane
The frost, your blood by that frost chilled
Even your love that's turned so cold –
Will warm your grateful heart again,
And you will bless all things that are,
Knowing that life itself means something
Much greater than Brand's "All or nothing!",
And that this world's forever fair.
. . . .

THE TWELVE

1

    Black evening.
    White snow.
    Wind, wind!
Careful, man, or down you go.
    Wind... wind...
Roaring the wide world over!

The white snow eddies
The white snow hisses
On sheets of murderous ice.
People slither
And slip on the ice...
Watch out, there! Oh, poor fellow!

From window to window
A cable stretched
With a streamer attached:
"All power to the Constituent Assembl[illegible]
Grannie stares with frightened eye[illegible]
Can't imagine what it signifies.
"What's it doing up there?
That silly old rag of a placard?
Think of the knickers the kiddies could [illegible]
And them going round half-naked.

Grandma, henwise, flaps and flutters
Over to the snow-drift's yonder side.
"Mother of Christ, preserve us!
The Bolshies'll murder us all in bed!"
A wind that flays!
The frost, if anything, worse!
And the bourgeois at the crossroads
Digs his frozen nose in fur.

But who might this be? Long, lank hair,
And muttering at the vacant air·
"Traitors! Traitors!
Woe to Russia!"
Must be a writer or a
Soap-box orator...

Beyond the snow-drift, on his own
Stands one with priestly garb on...
Wherefore art so woebegone,
Comrade parson?

Remember how majestically
Belly-first you'd pace,
With the cross upon your belly
Beaming at the populace?

The lady in the astrakhan
Walks up, accosts another:
"We sobbed as only lovers can..."
Slip, slither, and
Flop – she's over!
Easy, easy,
Ups-a-daisy!

The wind is merry
And vicious and gay;
He mows pedestrians
Over like hay;
Rips, wrenches, and yanks
The great streamer away:
"All power to the Constituent Assembly!"
And snatches on his way:

"So we are organised a meeting
Here inside this building...
Held a discussion,
Passed a resolution:
Ten for a moment, twenty for the night...
And not one kopek under that...
Fair enough? All right..."

Late evening.
Empty street.
Beggar shuffling
Ill-shod feet,
And the wind screaming...
"Lonesome, dearie?
On your ownsome?
Come to bed!"

Bread!
What's ahead?
Pass by!

A black, black sky.

Rage, rage, bitter rage
Seething in the heart...
Black rage, holy rage...

Comrade, be on
Your guard!

2.

The wind runs wild, the snowflakes beat.
Twelve men go marching down the street.

Black rifle-slings on shoulders gleaming;
Fires all round them flaming, flaming...

Fags a-dangle, caps askew –
You'd think they were a convict crew!

Liberty! Liberty!
We
Ain't
Got no Cross!
Rat-tat-tat!

It's *chilly, comrades, it's chilly*!

"Johnny's in a pub with Katie..."
"Kerensky rubles in her garter..."

"In the money, like I told you!
Once our Johnny, now a soldier!"

"Hey, Johnny, son-of-a-bourgeois-bitch, you
Kiss *my* girl and see what hits you!"

Liberty! Liberty!
We
Ain't
Got no Cross!
Johnny's having fun with Kate.
What can Kate be playing at?

Rat-tat-tat!

Lights all round them shining, shining...
Rifle-slings on shoulders gleaming...

Keep in step with the revolution!
Enemy watching – proceed with caution!

Comrade, have courage! Keep hold of your rifle!
Let's give Holy Russia a bloody good bellyful!

Stolid old
Solid old
Fat-arsed
Russia!

She
Ain't
Got no Cross!

3.

So the lads all went and hied them
For to join the gallant Reds
For to join the gallant Reds
For to lose their gallant heads!

Sweet life, you are so bitter,
So bitter-sweet you are!
Greatcoat torn and tattered
And a rifle made in Austria!

Bourgeois, bourgeois, you beware
When we set the world on fire
World on fire with flames of blood –
Grant us thy blessing, O Lord!

4.

Snowflakes fly, the coachman cries,
Johnny and Katie go spanking by –
Swank electric battery-lamp

Bobbing on the cab-shafts..
Mind your backs!

In an army greatcoat, Johnny,
With his stupid physiognomy,
Twirls and twirls his black mustachios,
Twirls and twiddles
And jokes and fiddles...

Good old Johnny–ain't he tough!
Good old Johnny–can't he bluff!
Holding Katie in his arms,
Trying out his charms...

Head flung back in sheer delight,
Pretty teeth all pearly white...
Oh, Katie, Katie, darling Katie,
Little snub-nosed Katie...

5.

Just below your neckline, Katie,
There's a knife-slash, newly scarred
Just below your bosom, Katie,
Skin and flesh are sorely marred!

Hey, hey, dance away!
Come and see that ankle-play!

Frilly undies, fair and fetching–
Fetch away, then, fetch away!
For the officers a-letching–
Letch away, then, letch away!

Hey, hey, letch away!
Kill your conscience for a day!

Katie, have you clean forgotten
Him that hadn't time to bolt
From my knife? Or does your rotten
Memory need a little jolt?

Hey, hey, jolt away
Through the night till break of day!

Pretty clothes, it was, and chocolates,
Swish cadets and Army swanks...
Now it's pride of all the privates
And the darling of the ranks!

Hey, hey, sin away!
Sin'll keep you young and gay!

6.

The driver comes galloping back again,
And shouts, and roars, and hollers amain...

Stop, stop, there! Andy, lend a hand!
Quick, Peter! Get them from behind!

Rat-tararat-tat-tat-tat-tat!
The snow spits upwards in their tracks!

The cab—with Johnny inside—is bolting.
Let's try another! Ram your bolt in!

Rat-tararat! I'll make you smart
. . . .
For pinching someone else's tart!

So dodge me, would you? Well,
don't worry,
I'll settle up with you tomorrow!

But what of Katie? Dead, stone dead!
Shot right through the bleeding head!

Well, Katie, happy? Not a word ..
Then lie there on the snow,
you turd!...

Keep in step with the revolution!
Enemy watching—proceed with caution!

7.

So the Twelve, with rifles shouldered,
Carry on into the night:
Only one – the hapless murderer –
Ghastly pale, as if in fright...

Faster, faster, and still faster
Urges he his hurried pace:
Round his neck a woollen muffler,
Horror written on his face.

"Why so glum and gloomy, comrade?
Why so miserable, mate?
Why so dismal and downhearted?
Conscience-stricken over Kate?"

"Once I loved that woman, comrades,
Till I thought my heart would bust...
Used to spend in her embraces
Nights of passion, nights of lust..

"All because there was a love-spark
In those laughing eyes of hers,
All because there was a birth-mark
On the shoulder that I kissed,
Like a fool, I pulled the trigger, went stark
Mad and shot her... Christ!"

"Well, of all the blinking blether[1]
Here's a proper rigmarole!
"Must we hang around for ever
While you vivisect your soul?"
"Now then, pull yourself together!"
"Try a bit of self-control!"
"This is not the time to spend in
Mothering the likes of you!
There's much bigger things impending;
We've got trouble coming too!"

Peter slows his pace a little...
Not in such a frantic hurry...

Seems to brighten up a little...
Now he's looking almost merry

Hey, hey!
Fun will drive your cares away!

Lock yourselves inside your flats!
Looters lurking in the streets!

Open every basement door!
Welcome in the starving poor!

8.

Sweet life, you are so deadly,
So deadly dull you are,
So full of nausea!

I'll sit on a fence and watch a bit
Watch a bit
Watch a bit...

Ruffle me hair and scratch a bit
Scratch a bit
Scratch a bit...

Crack a few nuts and munch a bit
Munch a bit
Munch a bit...

Pull out me dagger and slash a bit
Slash a bit
Slash a bit...

Fly away, bourgeois, fly away home!
I'll drink a blood-and-water
To the landlord's dark-eyed
daughter
For the evening when I caught her...

Lord, spare the soul of this thine handmaiden...
Nausea!

9

No sound of life throughout the city,
The Nevsky Tower is strangely quiet.
There's no policeman left on duty –
Come on, let's have a real old riot!

The bourgeois stands there at the crossroads,
And digs his frozen nose in fur,
While at his feet, with tail tucked under,
Cringes a mangy mongrel cur.

The bourgeois stands there, as if hungry,
Just stands there like a question mark;
The old world, like a starving mongrel,
Cowers at his feet, too cold to bark.

10.

Now the blizzard's really blowing:
  Blizzard, hoy! Blizzard, hey!
Can't see where your mates are going
  Half-a-dozen feet away!

Whirling *in a white maëlstrom*...
Soaring skyward in a column...

"What a snowstorm! Jesu mercy!"
"Peter, don't be such a sissy!
Did your holy bag of tricks
Save you from a fine old fix?
Superstitious bleeder, aren't you!
Use your ruddy common, can't you!
Who's got hands as red as red?
Who shot little Katie dead?"

"Keep in step with the revolution:
Enemy watching proceed with caution!"

21*

Onward, onward, you masses,
Working classes!

11.

.. So the Twelve go marching on,
Unsanctified, unblessed..
Grim and ruthless, every man
Ready for the worst...

Steely-glinting rifle-barrels
Levelled at the unseen foe...
Into empty streets and alleys
Where alone the storm-winds blow ..
Plunging knee-deep and regardless
Through the boot-ensnaring snow

Red flag flying
Right ahead.

Sound of marching's
Measured tread.

Foeman watching...
Keep your head!

And the blizzard in their faces
Never ceases
Night or day.

Onward, you masses,
Working classes!

12.

Onward still the Twelve go striding...
"Something's moving! Who goes there?"

Nothing but the red flag riding
Through the snowflake-flurried air...

Right in front – a freezing snow-drift...
"Something's moving! Who goes there?"
Nothing but a starving mongrel
Cringing slyly in the rear...

"Scat, you tyke, or else I'll stick your
Belly with my bayonet blade!
Old World, hop it – else I'll prick your
Filthy mangy mongrel hide!..."

...Snarling like a wolf that's hungry,
Tail tucked under; won't stay clear;
Shivering mongrel, homeless mongrel...
"Answer, will you! Who goes there?"

"Who's that with the red flag flying?"
"Try and spot him if you can!"
"Who's that dodging round the buildings
Like a convict on the run?

"I'll get hold of you, don't worry!
Whether you give up or not!
You'll be for it, comrade!
                    Hurry!
Come on out, or else be shot!"

Bang! And nothing but the echo
Rings across from house to house...
Nothing but the muffled laughter
Of the storm-wind in the snows...

    Rat-tat-tat!
    Rat-tat-tat!

...Onward still the Twelve go striding;
In their rear – a starving cur;
And with bloody banner leading,
Hidden by the howling storm,
Safe from human hurt or harm,

In a chaplet of white roses,
Stepping through the pearly snowdust,
    Shrouded in the snowy mist,
    In the distance – Jesus Christ.

January, 1918

THE SCYTHIANS

Panmongolism – a wild, wild word
But sweet it falls upon mine ear

Vladimir Soloviev

You are but millions. Our unnumbered nations
Are as the sands upon the sounding shore.
We are the Scythians! We are the slit-eyed Asians!
Try to wage war with us – you'll try no more!

You've had whole centuries. We – a single hour.
Like serfs obedient to their feudal lord,

We've held the shield between two hostile powers–
Old Europe and the barbarous Mongol horde.

Your ancient forge has hammered down the ages,
Drowning the distant avalanche's roar.
Messina, Lisbon – these, you thought, were pages
In some strange book of legendary lore.

Full centuries long you've watched our Eastern lar
Fished for our pearls and bartered them for
g
Made mockery of us, while you laid your plans
And oiled your cannon for the great campaign.

The hour has come. Doom wheels on beating wing.
Each day augments the old outrageous score.
Soon not a trace of dead nor living thing
Shall stand where once your Paestums flowered
bef

O Ancient World, before your culture dies,
Whilst failing life within you breathes
and sinks,
Pause and be wise, as Oedipus was wise,
And solve the age-old riddle of the Sphinx.

That Sphinx is Russia. Grieving and exulting,
And weeping black and bloody tears enough,
She stares at you, adoring and insulting,
With love that turns to hate, and hate – to
love.

Yes, love! For you of Western lands and birth
No longer know the love our blood enjoys.
You have forgotten there's a love on Earth
That burns like fire and, like all fire,
destroys.

We love cold Science passionately pursued;
The visionary fire of inspiration;
The salt of Gallic wit, so subtly shrewd,
And the grim genius of the German nation.

We know the hell of a Parisian street,
And Venice, cool in water and in stone;
The scent of lemons in the southern heat;
The fuming piles of soot-begrimed Cologne

We love raw flesh, its colour and its stench
We love to taste it in our hungry maws
Are we to blame then, if your ribs should
crack
Fragile between our massive, gentle paws?

We know just how to play the cruel game
Of breaking in the most rebellious steeds,
And stubborn captive maids we also tame
And subjugate, to gratify our needs...

Come join us, then! Leave war and war's alarms,
And grasp the hand of peace and amity.
While still there's time, comrades, lay down your
arms!
Let us unite in true fraternity!

But if you spurn us, then we shall not mourn.
We too can reckon perfidy no crime,
And countless generations yet unborn
Shall curse your memory till the end of time.

We shall abandon Europe and her charm.
We shall resort to Scythian craft and guile.
Swift to the woods and forests we shall swarm,
And then look back, and smile our slit-eyed
smile.

Away to the Urals, all! Quick, leave the land,
And clear the field for trial by blood
and sword,
Where steel machines that have no soul must stand
And face the fury of the Mongol horde.

But we ourselves, henceforth, we shall not serve
As henchmen holding up the trusty shield.
We'll keep our distance and, slit-eyed, observe
The deadly conflict raging on the field.

We shall not stir, even though the frenzied Huns
Plunder the corpses of the slain in battle, drive
Their cattle into shrines, burn cities down,
And roast their white-skinned fellow men alive.

O Ancient World, awake! For the last time
We call you to the ritual feast and fire
Of peace and brotherhood! For the last time
O hear the summons of the barbarian lyre!

30 January 1918

NOTES

BOOK ONE

Shakhmatovo–the estate owned by A N Beketov, Blok's grandfather, in the Klin district of the Moscow gubernia

Hamayun, the Prophetic Bird a reference to a picture, "Hamayun", by Victor Vasnetsov (1848-1926), according to an ancient Russian legend, a fabulous clairvoyant bird with a human face

"I sense your coming. Year follows fleeting year..." – *Soloviev*, Vladimir Sergeyevich (1853-1900), poet, philosopher, publicist and literary critic, a militant idealist and mystic who had a profound influence on the young Blok

"A plain that runs into the distance?..." – *Ivlevo*, a village near Shakhmatovo

"I believe in the Glory..."–a reference to the Apocalypse–"The Revelation of St John the Divine"

On His Grandfather's Death–Blok's maternal grandfather, *Beketov*, Andrei Nikolayevich (1825-1902), distinguished botanist, liberal social figure, professor and rector (1876-1883) of Petersburg University

Ecclesiastes–Paraphrased from Chap XII, vv 3-6, of The Book of Ecclesiastes

"It happened late one crimson evening..."–that Judas was present at the birth of Christ has no foundation in Biblical sources and seems to have been invented by Blok

The Old Man–Dedicated to Academician Andrei Sergeyevich *Famintsyn* (1835-1918), botanist and physiologist, and a close friend of the Beketovs

"'Is it all quiet with the people?'"–*rod of iron*–an image borrowed from the Apocalypse.

"She was fifteen. Given her heart's desire..."–the poem tells exactly how Blok and his future wife, Lyubov Dmitrievna Mendeleyeva, met on 7 November 1902 at a student party in the Hall of the Noblemen's Assembly, how he finally declared his love, and how they met again on 9 November in the Kazan Cathedral

From the Newspapers–*a man with a tin badge / On his big warm hat came round*–a policeman.

BOOK TWO

"Then they charged. Straight at the breast-bone..."–a response to "Bloody Sunday", 9 January 1905, when the tsarist government ordered the mass shooting of members of a peaceful march by Petersburg workers to the Winter Palace in order to present a petition to the tsar.

Autumn Freedom–*this highroad*–a reference to the Rogachevskoye highway near Shakhmatovo

Guardian Angel–addressed to Lyubov Blok, and written for their third wedding anniversary

Old Russia–According to Blok, "the magician's clouded stare, the casting of spells on the corn, the witches and demons in the snowdrifts by the wayside, the girl sharpening a knife under the snow for her faithless lover–all these are authentic images from our beliefs, charms and spells"

The Show Booth–the epigraph is from the play *Kean, ou Désordre et Genie* by Alexander Dumas

The Political Meeting–Blok mentions the influence on this poem of "The Ballad of Reading Gaol" by Oscar Wilde (1856-1900) in the Russian translation by K D Balmont

"The monarch in the lyric morning..."–this poem, was written on the day of the publication of the tsar's manifesto on the "granting" of a constitution, which Blok regarded as deceiving the freedom-loving aspirations and hopes of the people

His forebear, regal in cast iron–refers to the monument to Peter the Great, ("The Bronze Horseman")

Satiety–The poem was inspired by the October strikes of 1905 in Petersburg The capital's power station was, in particular, on strike at that time.

The Stranger–*Ozerki*–a suburban villa district in Petersburg

Cleopatra–in 1907, Blok was a frequent visitor to the newly opened panopticum (wax museum) in Petersburg which featured, among other exhibits, an image of Cleopatra furnished with a mechanism which created the illusion that she was actually breathing

The cycle **The Snow Mask**–This "lyrical poem" (as it is called in the manuscript) was written under the immediate impression of Blok's meeting and further acquaintance with *Natalia Nikolaevna Volokhova*, an actress at the Vera Kommissarzhevskaya Drama Theatre, to whom it is dedicated (as is the cycle *Faina*) *The Snow Mask* conveys Blok's impressions of a fancy-dress evening arranged by the actresses of the Kommissarzhevskaya Theatre–a "paper ball", as it was called, at which the ladies wore fancy-dress costumes made of paper

Behind the Masks–the last line refers to a book cupboard adorned with a bronze cupid in Blok's study

Faina's Song... "On the subject of a certain popular songstress Faina is a character in my play, *The Song of Fate*" (Note by Blok)

"With bitter and unceasing tears..."–*Uncrowned shade*–the words are from Pushkin's poem *Napoleon* This was the last poem to be dedicated by Blok to N N Volokhova

On the North Sea–*Volny Island* is one of those in the Neva delta The seaside resort of *Sestroretsk* is near Petersburg on the coast of the Gulf of Finland

BOOK THREE

On the Islands–*Elagin Bridge* is in Petersburg

The Aviator–the manuscript is dedicated to the memory of V.F. Smit, one of the first Russian pilots, who crashed before Blok's eyes on 14 May 1911 on the Kolomyazhsky aerodrome in Petersburg

The Commander's Footsteps–Wilhelm Alexandrovich *Zorgenfrei* (1882-1938) was a poet and friend of Blok's

Iambics–the poems in this cycle were mostly selected from the manuscripts of the first edition of the poem *Retribution* Angelina Alexandrovna *Blok* (1892-1918) was the daughter of the poet's father, A.L Blok, by his second marriage, the poet met his half-sister in December 1909 in Warsaw at his father's funeral, and afterwards saw her infrequently but treated her with great sympathy and took a personal interest in her

"With ear close to the ground, I listen..."–headed *To a Worker* in the manuscript, the poem was written on the day when the tsar's manifesto proclaimed the dissolution of the State Duma, after which the government went over to an open policy of brutal counter-revolutionary terror.

"By secret, by nocturnal pathways..."–*Their ships at sea*–a reference to the Battle of the Tsushima Straits, 14-15 May 1905, when the Japanese destroyed most of the Russian Pacific Ocean Fleet.

"They do not sleep, remember, barter..."–*You* is Lyubov Blok: *that night*–7 8

November 1902, when Blok and Lyubov Mendeleyeva declared their love for one another.

"How heartily you laughed at us..." – the final couplet is a quotation from Tyutchev's poem *Silentium*

"I'm Hamlet, and my blood runs cold..." – addressed to his wife and associated with memories of an amateur "Shakespeare performance" on 1 August 1898 at Boblovo, the Mendeleyevs' estate Blok played Hamlet, and Lyubov Mendeleyeva was Ophelia.

"In all the fire and cold of troubles..." – *beside the tombstone* – a reference to the grave of the poet's father, A.L. Blok

"All that is over, over, over..." – *the glade I loved so dearly* – Shakhmatovo *Kalita* – the nickname ("Purse") given to the Grand Duke of Moscow, Ivan Danilovich (died 1340)

To Anna Akhmatova – a reply to a poem from Anna Andreyevna Akhmatova (1889-1966) To Alexander Blok ("I paid a visit to a poet ")

"No! You'll not break the spell upon my heart..." – addressed to L D Blok *First on the ninth, then on the fortieth day* – days marked out by the Orthodox church for remembering the dead

On Trial – addressed to L D Blok

"She made fun of it at the beginning..." – addressed to L A Delmas (see below)

Carmen – Blok wrote this cycle as a result of his meeting and friendship with Lyubov Alexandrovna Andreyeva-Delmas, a singer who played Carmen in the opera by Bizet The passages in the poems printed in italics are quotations from the libretto of that work

On Kulikovo Field – In 1912, Blok furnished this verse cycle with the following note· "The Battle of Kulikovo is one of the symbolic events in Russian history Such events are destined to return The divination of their true significance is still in the future " The symbolism of the Battle of Kulikovo (8 September 1380) was an important stage in the liberation of Russia from the Mongol-Tatar yoke and featured prominently in Blok's thoughts about the fate of Russia, the relationship between the people and the intelligentsia, and the imminent revolution

On the Railway – "The unconscious imitation of an incident in *Resurrection* by Lev Tolstoy· Katyusha Maslova, while at a small railway-station, sees Nekhlyudov through the window, sitting in a velvet seat in a brightly lit first-class compartment" (Note by Blok) *Ivanova*, Maria Pavlovna was the sister of Blok's intimate friend, E.P Ivanov

The New America – *hetman's pennants* – horses' tails affixed to the top of a tall pole, an emblem of authority and rank among the Ukrainian Hetmans

"Those born in eras of stagnation..." – *Hippius*, Zinaida Nikolayevna (1869-1945) – poet, writer and critic; a representative of symbolist literature, emigrated in 1920, bitterly denounced the October Revolution and Blok's writings of that period *From days of war, from days of freedom* – a reference to the Russo-Japanese War and the revolutionary events of 1904-1905

"A damp summer. I'm lying...." – Blok is referring to a well-known tract by German Socialist August Bebel (1840-1913) "Woman and Socialism", in which he demonstrated that, under the conditions of the bourgeois economic and social structure, woman is doomed to domestic slavery *I know a woman..* Blok means N N. Volokhova.

To Pushkin House – written a few days before the ceremony in honour of Pushkin on the occasion of the 84th anniversary of his death .. *the Sphinx of legend* and the *bronze horseman* – the ancient Theban Sphinx on the Neva Embankment and the monument to Peter the Great ("The Bronze Horseman")

Secret Freedom – from Pushkin's poem *To N.Ya Plyuskova*

From the white of the Senate – in 1921, Pushkin House was accommodated

in the main building of the Academy of Sciences almost directly opposite Senate Square (now Decembrists' Square).

RETRIBUTION

Foreword – *Strindberg* August (1849-1912) Blok, for a time, was very much influenced by the work and personality of the Swedish writer, in whom he saw features of the democrat and the "new man" with his will and his courage. *Milyukov*, P.N (1869-1943) leader of the Cadet Party, ideologist of the imperialist bourgeoisie An article, "The Imminence of a Major War" (by A.P. Mertvago) was published in the newspaper *Utro Rossii* on 25 October 1911 the article demonstrated the inevitability of war between Russia and Germany. *Yushchinsky*, Andrei – a small boy murdered by the Kievan Black Hundreds with the provocatory aim of staging a "Ritual murder" supposedly committed by Jews The resulting scandal of the "Beilis affair" was one of the most nauseating episodes in the reactionary policy of tsarism on the eve of its collapse The Panther-Agadir incident – In July 1911, a German warship, the *Panther*, entered the harbour of Agadir in Morocco This led to a sharp deterioration in Franco-German and Anglo-German relations at one time, a general European war seemed inevitable

Stolypin P A (1862-1911) – Chairman of the Committee of Ministers during the years of reaction, he brutally suppressed the revolutionary movement; he was murdered by an agent of the security police *Marina* – Marina Mniszek, wife of the first False Dmitri and also of the second *Kosciusko*, Thaddeus (1746-1817) – leader of the Polish national-liberation movement The *Apukhtin years* – after A N Apukhtin (1840-1893), a lyrical poet popular in the Eighties, who often wrote in the spirit and form of the "gypsy romance"

Serves him the Poet's head on a dish – a variation on the Biblical story of Salome who, in return for a dance for Herod Antipas, King of Galilee, demanded the head of John the Baptist

The Morning Star – the fallen angel of Biblical legend who was cast from Heaven for arrogance

Récamier, Julie-Adelaide (1777-1849) – a famous beauty whose salon was frequented by many outstanding people of the time

The ominous and ghostly comet – in 1910, there was widespread controversy about the appearance of Halley's Comet, which was thought to endanger the Earth

the North's ailing capital city – Petersburg Here follows a description of the return of the Guards to Petersburg from the Russo-Turkish War of 1877-1878

The room is full almost to bursting – this introduces a passage based by Blok on memoirs and describing a New Year celebration by members of the People's Will movement, among them Sofia Perovskaya (1853-1881), who died on the scaffold for taking part in the assassination of the Tsar Alexander II (*a woman's sitting*), and S M Stepnyak-Kravchinsky (1852-1895) (*. a new guest stands upon the threshold*)

Under that northern city sky – This is the beginning of an account of the Beketov family, to which Blok belonged on his mother's side.

The Princess Marya Alexevna – a quotation from *Woe from Wit* by A S Griboyedov (1795-1829) "Oh Lord, what is she going to say, / The Princess Marya Alexevna?") which has passed into popular speech as a catch-phrase

A People's Will – a magazine (1879-1885), illegal organ of the People's Will party, a revolutionary terrorist organisation

The family head – Andrei Nikolayevich Beketov – Blok's grandfather

Borel's – a fashionable restaurant in Petersburg

Shchedrin – M Ye Saltykov-Shchedrin (1826-1889) – a famous satirist who was on friendly terms with the Beketovs

The fair ray of light – the paraphrased title of a famous article by N A. Dobrolyubov (1836-1861) "A Ray of Light in the Dark Kingdom".

Anna Vrevsky–Blok is referring to a liberal social figure whose name in real life was A P Filosofova (1837-1912)

Diary–*The Diary of a Writer*–a periodical brought out personally by F M Dostoyevsky (1821-1881) in 1873, 1876-1877 and 1880-1881 during the time when he was on close terms with *K P Pobedonostsev* (1827-1907), High Procurator of the Synod, a leading ideologist of the Black Hundreds and the police state, and the instigator of tsarist reactionary policy in the 80s

Polonsky, Yakov *Petrovich (1819-1898)–well-known poet, highly thought of by Blok*

One youthful savant –at this point, the narrative introduces the poet's father, Professor Alexander Lvovich Blok (1852-1909)

A bomb was hurled –On 1 March 1881, by the Catherine Canal in Petersburg, Alexander II was executed in accordance with a sentence of the Executive Committee of the People's Will Party

Carillons–A reference to the chiming clock in the bell-tower of the cathedral in the Peter-and-Paul Fortress

The terrible / Dawn of the Orient –An omen of the Russo-Japanese War, 1904

The tsar, enormous, dropsical –Alexander III (1845-1894)

"*Prince*"–in pre-revolutionary times, a common nickname for a Tatar rag-and-bone man

Copernicus Bending above his hollow sphere –a reference to the monument to Copernicus in Warsaw

Who took all Vrubel's strength away –The picture by M A Vrubel (1856-1910), "The Demon", was known in several versions During the last years of his life, the now deranged artist sought feverishly for the best rendering of the Demon's likeness, painted it a great many times, repainted it, and often spoiled his own work

In cruel and cold dream after dream He keeps on seeing "Woe from Wit"–there is a story that the idea for *Woe from Wit* came to Griboyedov as the result of a dream

THE TWELVE

"*All power to the Constituent Assembly!*"–This assembly was founded on 5 January 1918 in Petrograd However, since its composition and tactics did not fully reflect the political situation that developed in the country after the October Revolution, it was dissolved on 6 January 1918.

Kerensky rubles in her garter –Money named after A F Kerensky, head of the predominantly bourgeois counter-revolutionary Provisional Government in Russia in 1917

The Nevsky Tower–the tower on the building of the Great City Duma on the Nevsky Prospekt

THE SCYTHIANS

Messina, Lisbon –Lisbon was destroyed by earthquakes twice–in the 14th and the 18th centuries In 1908, Messina suffered a similar fate *Paestum*–an Ancient Greek colony in Southern Italy, sacked by the Arabs in the 9th century

REQUEST TO READERS

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Erratum

Page 262, line 19 from bottom	Should Read:
	was written and said at that time both in the symbolist camp